



## WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT INCLUSION AND WHY IT MATTERS

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# STRENGTH IN PERSPECTIVE

"What are the values of diversity and inclusion?" I want to share how my own diversity has helped my practice. To do that, I have to start with my dad's amazing story.

My dad was born in Cuba in 1949. He was a mischievous child who named his pet iguana after his sister and played pranks on teachers. The revolution in 1959 brought a swift end to his childhood. Secret police forced him into military training camps where he experienced the horror of guerilla warfare. Fearing for his life, his parents (legally) sent him alone to Miami in 1960 with a bottle of wine and a box of cigars to sell -- the only items the Cuban government would let him keep. Homeless at age twelve and unable to speak English, he sold coconuts to stay alive for two years. The Catholic Church took him in until his reunion with family in 1962. They lost everything, including family members executed by Castro and Guevara.

He served in the U.S. military during the Vietnam War and lived with the lasting impact of that trauma. He put himself through school and became a Spanish professor. He expanded his students' world views while giving back to Hispanic/Latino communities, often by interpreting for courts and hospitals. He cherished the freedoms taken for granted here but so easily lost in Cuba. He treated people fairly and with respect, from the penniless transient to the wealthiest landowner. He raised a resilient and fiery daughter (apologies to my husband).

I miss him dearly.

At Legal Aid, I focused on housing discrimination such as evictions

based on crimes abusers committed against women -- something even I went through in college. Often, landlords were skeptical of survivors' narratives because they did not understand other perspectives. Maybe one client did not call police because law enforcement officers in her home country frequently raped women. Maybe another stayed married because of her faith and fear of loss of community support. Maybe another did not seek an Order of Protection because of her physical injuries and debilitating PTSD.

My perspective and background make me a better attorney. I saw the value in cases others might view as lost causes. Clients with similar backgrounds or life experiences were relieved that I did not dismiss their perspectives. People I had never met called me because I had taken the time to understand a friend's culture, faith, or medical condition. When possible, I tried to educate the landlords and work collaboratively to address underlying issues and preserve their relationship with tenants to reach better outcomes. Other times, I enjoyed a hotly contested trial. I love my current work at the City of Knoxville where I review land use decisions from multiple perspectives to ensure legal compliance and strive for equity on a systemic level.

So, what are the values of diverse attorneys who are included? We bring in new, diverse client markets. We strive for outcomes which are even more client-centric. We collaborate to strengthen communities. We are not discouraged by tough fact patterns. We do not shake in the face of adversity. Invite us to your table -- you are always welcome at mine.



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