



## WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT INCLUSION AND WHY IT MATTERS

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# STEP INTO THE ARENA (LEST WE MISS OUT ON EACH OTHER)

*If you don't know the kind of person I am and I don't know the kind of person you are, a pattern that others made may prevail in the world and following the wrong god home we may miss our star. -William E. Stafford*

Let me start by confessing that although being a foreign-born, minority attorney, I have always felt woefully inadequate to speak about the topics of diversity and inclusion—and for good reason.

First, I am the product of privilege. In the early 90s, the annual per capita income in my native Panama hovered around \$6,500. Lucky for me, my mother, a single parent and pediatrician, was better off than most and—through much effort—put me through private Catholic high school and sent me to learn English at wonderful Maryville College.

Second, I have not been discriminated against (at least overtly) for 27 years in our country. Upon arriving in East Tennessee, the world was as sweet as it could be for a sixteen-year-old kid in the land of Michael Jordan, Bon Jovi, the 49ers (with 4 Super Bowls in the 80s), and the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Despite my accent, mixed-race looks and names (Hispanic and Chinese), place of birth, and even long hair (at one point reaching the middle of my back), I was greeted with, and continue to enjoy, kindness and support. That said, I have painfully learned and re-learned that my experience does not reflect what other minorities have lived, some for multiple generations. And yet, for me, America truly became the “land of opportunity.”

The bliss ended mere hours after the shameful acts of January 6, 2021. I condemned unequivocally on social media the desecration of the U.S. Capitol by domestic actors. For that, I was swiftly told that I did not “have a dog in this hunt!” The clear implication was that my citizenship meant “NOTHING” (yes, I’m quoting the CAPS) because I had not been born on American soil. I hope none of you harbor the same animus. If you do, I respectfully say to you what I said to that “friend”: An attempt to diminish my love and devotion for our country means

little from someone who had to personally do exactly nothing to earn the privilege of American citizenship. It would be more than two decades after my arrival until I was able to freely and proudly take the Oath of Allegiance in 2016 (but that’s another, long and rich, conversation).

It’s what followed the punch in the gut that really impacted me. Within moments, a number of fellow American friends and acquaintances—some older, some younger; some personal, some professional; some local, some out of state—used their voice to challenge the fallacy that we have degrees of citizenship in our country, to declare that such condescension is antithetical to what America stands for, to refute the notion that I don’t deserve to have a stake and a voice in its future. I wept that night.

So, what have I learned about inclusion and why it matters? I have learned that inclusion must be pursued, shared, and defended. I have learned that we, especially those of us privileged with a legal education, must use our voices to speak up clearly and unapologetically when the situation presents itself and to defend our shared values. Importantly, we must acknowledge things as they are *before* we can move toward what we aspire them to be. And we must refuse to indulge in the illusion that the issues we know exist will magically improve without *personally* engaging in self-examination, difficult conversations, and—yes—holding each other accountable for actions that do not reflect who we are and what we stand for. It matters because standing on the sidelines only perpetuates the status quo. It matters because without our actions, we will certainly miss out on each other.

The path ahead is long and steep, no doubt. I feel like I just began mine with the words before you. If you haven’t yet, I hope you choose to get going—today. I guarantee that for each challenge you’ll encounter, you’ll also find a multitude of voices cheering you on. You have my contact info.



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