



WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT INCLUSION AND WHY IT MATTERS

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BELONGING

Diversity without inclusion is meaningless. Being an immigration attorney has afforded me a privilege to see firsthand what role inclusion plays on a personal level. Having faced discrimination as a child, you feel helpless in such situations. At first, I didn't realize the extent what these incidents meant; but, they didn't hurt any less. There was a sense of belonging that I struggled to find. Currently, I see my clients expressing the same sentiment.

When immigrants arrive in a host country, their ability to speak the host language makes a big difference whether they are able to integrate. However, the response from the host country plays an even more important role whether we should talk about inclusion and how we can reach that goal.

The past few years have brought to surface a lot of anti-immigrant sentiment that previously were not spoken this outwardly. The fabric of any community is built upon trust and safety. Such violent response isolates and separates. It creates a world of us versus them. The haves and have nots. Unfortunately, such expressions lead to mind boggling terms such as legal and illegal. You and I understand what is meant when such terms are thrown out, but imagine what it means to someone who doesn't yet fully understand the host language. To be called illegal. Without context. Just illegal.

I conduct free legal clinics regularly where people will reach out to ask about immigration matters. In talking with them, often I find myself repeating this question, "Why didn't you call the cops?" Someone's life was threatened, or they were robbed, or they were in an abusive relationship, but they didn't reach out to the police for help because

they were also scared of them. They are an organization whose entire purpose is to protect individuals in our community, and people are afraid to call them. To me, that is a failure on our part as a community. People should not be forced to suffer because they felt they didn't belong, and no one was out there to help them.

My concern is not necessarily only about the immigrant community, but the community at large. Inclusion allows us to change conditions to allow everyone to feel at home. To feel safe. To feel like they can reach out for help. The question of inclusion is really about how we figure out as a community to eliminate the barriers that hinder people from feeling

safe and also reaching their full potential. It is extremely difficult to have a strong sense of community without also having a strong sense of belonging. A sense of hospitality. As we continue to grow as a community, we will see that our strength is in inclusivity and not divisiveness.

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