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Yesterday started with me broadcasting a live Ellie.2.0 radio show on AM950 from my hotel room just south of Montgomery, Alabama. It's always a bit tricky to do live radio, even more so from a hotel room where you don't have the benefit of watching your producer's clock as the minutes and then seconds count down to time for commercials. I pulled it off with a minor glitch at the end; a big thanks to my producer, Brett Johnson, for coming into the station early to make the show happen! (And thanks also to the station owner, Chad Larson, for allowing me to push the envelope!)

On the show, I spoke about what I've been finding on my road trip through the South. If you would like to listen to a podcast of the show, here is a link:

<http://www.am950radio.com/events/ellie-2-0/>

Because the link won't be live on PDF, you can Google "Ellie2.0 radio" and you'll find the February 5 show to click on.

From Montgomery, I drove north to Birmingham where I met with a dozen members of the Birmingham Bar Association Diversity and Inclusion Committee for a luncheon roundtable to discuss challenges facing the legal community relative to diversity and particularly, inclusivity. (A huge thanks to committee chairperson Martha Cook and to BBA Executive Director Jennifer Buettnner and Program and Admin. Director Dana Thomas for making the event happen!) The welcome was warm and genuine; I was also so taken by how everyone very willingly spoke up and shared, many from their hearts.

Seated around the table were many people of color and many women (of the dozen people in the room, three were male). I shared about my experiences in working with legal employers and in training law firms, court systems and various government entities. I spoke of how legal employers generally understand the need for diversity (e.g. the need to have lawyers and team members who are "other" [people from marginalized communities] in the workplace) but consistently fail at inclusivity (e.g. making diverse team members feel as if they matter to the legal employer). I offered tips on how to be more inclusive, including the use of employee resource or affinity groups, effective mentorship and sponsorship, book clubs, inclusion-focused newsletters and having in place a written Inclusion, Diversity and Equity Plan.

When I opened the meeting for general discussion, I learned so very much, including how Birmingham is a "blue bubble in a red state." I heard how attitudes in greater Alabama make it difficult for attorneys of color to be effective when they travel outside

of Birmingham. I also heard that as is the case across the country, legal employers have difficulty finding "qualified" attorneys of color. (My quotation is because legal employers often fail to evaluate diverse lawyers on their own merits versus some "apples to apples" formula that weeds out all but white job candidates.)

When the discussion turned to LGBTQ attorneys, an attendee recounted how not all that long ago, someone she had respected told her that gay and lesbian people were sinful because of their same sex attractions. (I also heard how that woman pushed back at the comments—thank you for that great allyship!) I was also told that most LGBTQ lawyers are not "out" (e.g. public) at their workplaces. Indeed, a senior partner from a 200-lawyer firm told me that they had had only one "out" lawyer, who subsequently left the firm. I then responded that statistically, that firm would be expected to have between 8 and 18 LGBTQ lawyers and we talked about why other attorneys might be afraid to be their true selves at work.

For me, from the LGBTQ-haven Twin Cities, the discussion about queer lawyers was an eye-opener. Frankly, hearing about intolerance and fear of being true to one's self hurt my heart—I can only imagine how people are suffering because they feel the need to hide such an important part of their identity. I also assume that one way or another, such hiding adversely affects one's ability to be an effective lawyer.

On the positive side, the 200-lawyer firm senior partner was genuinely interested in learning how he could make his firm more welcoming to LGBTQ lawyers. (One of my suggestions: begin to talk about how the firm wants to be welcoming to anyone who is LGBTQ.)

Also, on the positive side, more than half raised their hand when I asked who in the room knew someone who is transgender (other than knowing me). I was very surprised by that response—nice!

As we ended the meeting, I heard one last thing of significance—the word "fatigue." Several folks spoke about how they are tiring from years of being the only voice in their workplace relative to greater diversity and inclusion. It was clear that these folks are so incredibly passionate about changing the landscape in Birmingham and Alabama but the pushback they encounter is wearing them down. Again, hearing this so saddened me.

My response to the fatigue comments: bring me back to Birmingham. Let me be a (kind and gentle) catalyst for recruiting more local advocates for change within the legal community. Yes, I know that sounds self-serving; however, often you do need someone from outside who can come and share perspective that sparks imagination and energy.

As the meeting ended, one of the men in the room, Steve Rygiel, Legal Director for Birmingham Aids Outreach, asked to speak with me. We then had a delightful half hour conversation about the incredible work that BAO is doing—not only on HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, but as well on many different intersectionalities, including founding/maintaining a medical clinic (*the only one in Alabama*) that serves transgender humans. Steve wanted to brainstorm about bringing me back to

Birmingham to work with BAO and the people it serves, something that I am greatly interested in doing. (Let's make that happen Steve!)

I am learning so very much as I travel this part of America. The folks I've met are so friendly, so genuine. But people are struggling and afraid—all because humans are so fearful of "other" or of being labelled as "other."

The idealist in me believes that with a great deal of hard work, persistence, and hope, things can change. It's just that we must be willing to do all of that. And when "fatigue" enters the picture, that's when we run the risk of giving up.

I, for one, promise never to give up. It's simply not in my DNA.

ellie

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