

DIVERSITY

Dialogues



Matthew Skinner, Esq. was appointed executive director of the New York State Unified Court System's Richard C. Failla LGBTQ Commission in December 2017. The Commission was created in 2016 to promote equal participation and access throughout the court system regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. It was named in honor of deceased New York State Supreme Court Justice and LGBTQ rights

advocate Richard C. Failla, who was the first openly gay person elected to that court. Skinner was previously executive director of LeGaL, the LGBT Bar Association and Foundation of Greater New York.

Susan Goodman **What three words would you use to describe your current role?**

Matt Skinner: Past, present, and future. I try to honor all three. We want to acknowledge the court's complicated past with the LGBTQ community and move forward with confidence in the present into a better future. We are always working to build a court system that provides access and equal treatment to the LGBTQ community.

SG: **Can you describe the importance of the Failla LGBTQ Commission to the New York State court system, and what you hope to bring to your new position?**

Matt Skinner: We see it as a platform that gives the LGBTQ community an official voice and creates an open channel with senior leadership in the court system. It's a way to bring our concerns, our dynamism, our rich, diverse experiences into play and be part of the tapestry that is the court system.

SG: **What is the current focus of the commission?**

Matt Skinner: The transgender community has some very specific challenges when it comes to navigating the courts, and public life generally. The Commission was instrumental in amending the court system's anti-discrimination policies to explicitly prohibit discrimination based on gender identity and

gender expression in 2018. The Commission then provided training at the fall nonjudicial court system conferences where we offered best practices and respectful terminology. We are currently working on a template for bathroom signage to let the transgender and gender nonconforming community know they are welcome to use the rest rooms in the various court houses of the court system. We are in the final stages and planning for the signs to go up in 2019.

In addition, we had a very busy Pride month this past June, with events in almost every JD around the state. We are proud of how many regions we were able to cover and bring our message to.... One particularly great event was held at 60 Centre Street, where we honored William Thom, the first openly gay judge in New York, who had to go all the way to the Court of Appeals to legally incorporate Lambda Legal, which he founded in 1973. It was the 45th anniversary of that landmark decision.

SG:

What is your biggest professional achievement to date?

Matt Skinner:

When Judge Paul Feinman was appointed to the Court of Appeals in June 2017, I was still the executive director of LeGaL, the LGBT Bar Association and Foundation of Greater New York. I was involved in the lobbying effort to pick him and it was just a watershed moment for the community--it felt like we had really arrived. And now, I get to work with him as a member of the Commission.

SG:

Describe a typical day in your professional life.

Matt Skinner:

A lot of phone calls and emails, committee meetings, events I go to in the evening to support LGBTQ organizations. I regularly travel and make sure we maintain strong relationships with people on the ground throughout the state. I am also committed to bringing the work of the commission into the modern world of social media, so part of my day is allocated to that. We have a very active Twitter account [@NYCourtsLGBTQ](#), as well as videos posted on YouTube. We are committed to strengthening our virtual presence.

SG:

Whom do you consider a mentor and why?

Matt Skinner:

I have worked with many of the trailblazing gay judges on the Commission, including current co-chairs, Appellate Division Justices Marcy Kahn and Joanne Winslow, as well as Presiding Justice Elizabeth Garry of the Appellate Division, Third Department—all of whom have been great models of leadership and integrity. They're wonderful teachers on how to handle a lot of varied, complicated challenges, and remain collegial, friendly, and supportive. Judge Paul Feinman and Justice Rosalyn Richter have also taught me a lot. I also frequently turn to Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission Executive Director Joyce Hartsfield to seek advice and counsel.

SG: **How would you advise prospective LGBTQ applicants to the court system?**

Matt Skinner: Consider building your career here. There is a wonderful community waiting for you. When you put your mind to it, it is possible to rise to the top levels; the sky is really the limit these days.

SG: **Before you leave this position, what would you like your greatest achievement to have been?**

Matt Skinner: I would really like the members of the LGBTQ community to feel comfortable bringing their whole selves to the courts, no matter what part of the state they are in, to feel they are part of an even playing field--both for the staff who work in the courts and those who use and need our court system every day.