

John Caher:

Welcome to Amici, news and insight from the New York Judiciary and the Unified Courts System. I'm John Caher.

June is Pride Month, and the Richard C. Failla LGBTQ Commission of the New York Courts is hosting a dozen events across the state throughout the month. The first event was in Albany on June 10, where Presiding Justice Elizabeth Garry of the Appellate Division, Third Department, spoke. Justice Garry is a historic figure in her own right, the first openly gay Presiding Justice in state history. Here is a snippet of her poignant remarks.

Justice Garry:

This is, of course, a particularly momentous series of Pride events that are happening across our state this year because we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall event. This anniversary provides an important opportunity to look back from where we came, and to examine, to some extent, the history of LGBTQ people and the law. We well know, we all know, that LGBTQ people have faced a long history of discrimination. The law dictated the contours of relationships, child rearing, housing, employment opportunities, and so many other areas affecting our personal lives in ways that were intentionally discriminatory. Like many other painful chapters of our nation's history, we have to reckon with that, especially, of course, those of us who work in government or in the courts.

We look back upon the ways in which our laws and our prior judicial decisions reflected and reinforced those of the social majority at the time. LGBTQ people, as we know, were pathologized, criminalized, and regarded with contempt, and what I have called righteous ugliness. For many people, that left two choices: Either live in secrecy or face and suffer the consequences. It was around that time that Stonewall and the Pride Movement were born. It was around that time when activists began rejecting those two options and demanding social justice.

We've here for a Pride event in the Albany County Courthouse because we have made tremendous strides in these 50 years. But, as we celebrate Pride Month, it's important to reflect upon the progress, to pause and consider the hard work, the extensive effort that went into that progress, what was actually undertaken by courageous individuals and groups that got us to where we are today. We are mindful, of course, of the progress yet to come.

As we recall a history of fear and discrimination, we're reminded of the importance of being thoughtful, open-minded, compassionate, and of acting in a way that does not further or continue fostering or perpetuating prejudice.

Today, we're fortunate. We have better access than ever to information about how our own personal biases affect our decision-making, and the importance of treating everyone with the respect that they deserve. For instance, we're more conscious than at any time in history of the challenges facing gender non-conforming and transgender individuals. Our civic institutions are actively taking steps to increase the level of respect and protection afforded to those members

of our community. It's an area where many of us may have opportunities to grow and to learn, to become more sensitive and more respectful of the needs of our fellow citizens.

Celebrating Pride also gives us a chance to acknowledge all that we have to gain when we achieve meaningful diversity and inclusion in our workplaces and in our society because we all benefit from treating people fairly, and including them in our decision-making process and our institutions. One way we do that is of course through cultural competency. This is particularly important in our courts. Negative experiences in our justice system erode confidence in the rule of law. Disrespectful even if inadvertent, may cause people to avoid jury service or hesitate to bring their sensitive cases to our courts.

We must, therefore, undertake affirmative efforts to be inclusive in order that we maintain our legitimacy and that we fully earn the trust of the public whom we serve. Our court leaders in the Third District have shown a real commitment to this undertaking, and I commend you for that and for really demonstrating that we mean it when we say, "Equal justice for all." It's got to happen. It's got to happen now.

I'm going to close with this: There was an old bumper sticker that used to proclaim that, "Hate is not a family value." Some of you have seen that bumper sticker, that flier. Hate is not a family value. Hate is not a religious or a spiritual value either, and most assuredly, hate is not a value of our great nation or of our state or of our court system.

John Caher:

Thanks for listening to Amici. If you have an idea for an Amici interview, please contact me. I'm John Caher, and I can be reached at 518-453-8669.