

Promoting Diversity in the Courts: Daniel Santiago-Stewart

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, news and insight from the New York courts. I'm John Caher.

As a recovering journalist, I know that often the best story is the one right in front of you. So for today's Diversity Dialogue segment, let's welcome to the program Dan Santiago-Stewart. Dan works for the Office of Diversity & Inclusion, where he helps coordinate the Diversity Dialogue interviews. But Dan has a story to tell as well, and today we're going to drag him out of the background and put him front and center.

So, Dan, in a profile, our colleague Rena Micklewright wrote about you for the *Mosaic* newsletter about a year ago, you said you had been a shy kid who was terrified to speak in public and you wanted nothing more than to be invisible. Is that just your natural personality, a function of being gay, or some combination thereof?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

I think it's a combination of a few things. Being a second child in the family I think had a lot to do with it. I have an older sister. She's about a year older than me, and she had a very strong personality. So, she sort of did everything, and I sort of followed along whatever she did. She took charge. She was always outgoing and very loud, and I sort of tried to stay in the background.

She used to get in a lot of trouble, and I didn't want to be in trouble, so I tried to hide. That's the way it seemed. I do think that a big part of it was just trying not to get in trouble, trying to hide. I remember being very young and being that way.

John Caher: So it sounds like it was both environmental and maybe just a personality in your DNA.

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

Yep, yep. Just being a quiet person. I also remember being afraid of everything when I was younger. I don't know where that came from, but it might stem from my mom, who is a wonderful person, but one of the ways she got her kids to do things that she wanted was she would tell them everything's going to kill you! "If you jump off the bed, you're going to fall and break your leg and die. You could do this and die." And she instilled a sense of fear that has followed me into adulthood at times.

And being an adult, and being grown, and having my own child, I desperately tried not to do that to him. I didn't want him to have that same fear. I didn't ever want to tell him that if he does something, he could die. My son ended up being the most adventurous child ever, and I would wince constantly, because he would jump off the stairs on a skateboard, he would stand on handlebars on his bike going down the hill in front of my street. He was a daredevil when he was young, and I was terrified constantly.

John Caher: So where did you grow up?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

I grew up in New York City. I grew up at the Dyckman Projects in Inwood, which is in Upper Manhattan.

John Caher: And what did your parents do?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

They've had multiple careers. When I was young, my mom was a bookkeeper, first at Macy's. I have a lot of wonderful memories going to Macy's when I was five, six and seven and riding the wooden escalators—the one on 34th Street. She worked there as a bookkeeper for several years. And it was so much fun to be behind the scenes there, going into the storeroom and the back stairwells, and doing all these things because I was able to, because she worked there.

When I got older, she worked in a daycare center as a bookkeeper. And then when they decided to move, they moved upstate and she got a job working as a caseworker— social worker—for Section 8 housing. She helped people get Section 8 housing.

John Caher: Section 8 housing is subsidized housing for senior citizens and others, correct?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

Correct, yes. And she did that until she retired. She did that from I guess the age of 40 till the time she retired. My dad ,when I was younger, he worked in shipping and receiving for a company called Tie City. And again, I remember being taken to that company, and being behind the scenes, and seeing the ties being made, and having fun experiences there.

Growing up, I was one of the very few boys in my school who knew how to tie a bow tie, tie a Windsor knot and a half Windsor knot, instead of that little flip that people do, which I can't stand when I make a tie. So that was his initial job when I was younger.

At some point, he got laid off from that job and we had a difficult, I'd say about a year or two, if I remember correctly, when I was younger, because he was without work. And then he fortunately got a position working as a track worker for MTA, and he did that from his forties until he retired, or mid-thirties I think when he started with MTA, and then he retired from the MTA, New York City MTA.

John Caher: Who are your major role models as a child, your heroes?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

I don't distinctly have a hero, or role model, or anyone I guess. I do remember looking up to certain teachers in high school. There were certain people as I was growing up that sort of struck me as interesting. And one in particular was a history teacher in high school. He was really quirky, a lot of fun. I would think of him as a role model or something like that.

As I got older, that kind of thinking about certain people translated into different supervisors that I had had. I had a chief clerk when I first started working in the court system, that I actually tried to mold myself after. I tried to emulate what he did. I liked the way he managed his courthouse and the things that he taught me and I tried to continue on in my own career with the courts.

John Caher: When did it first occur to you that you were gay, and how did you and your family respond

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

As an adult, I can look back and see that when I was really young, I was always very, very interested in men, in the older boys. Much more than any women. I can remember going to summer camp and wanting to follow around the camp counselor who was my camp counselor, and just being crazy about that person. I didn't know back then anything about being gay, but I do think that was part of it, that I was so enamored by certain men in my life when I was really young.

As a teenager, I had girlfriends all in school, but I also did things with boys. As a teenager, there were certain boys who you could kiss or you could do things with. And I did that.

When I was 16, I got a job working for the New York Public Library and I found a book on sexuality, and I started to read it because I was confused as to why I had a girlfriend but would kiss a boy. And in that book, in the '80s, it talked about how boys experiment. And I said, "Oh, I'm experimenting. This is fine." At that point it was, "Is there something wrong with me because I'm doing this?" And I was like, "Okay, there's nothing wrong with me. I'm just experimenting. The book says so."

And then I started realizing—I think it was about three years later, I was about 19—and I realized I hadn't had a girlfriend in over a year, but I was still kissing boys. And it was like, "At this point, you can't just be experimenting anymore." And so that was the process of my starting to realize, "Okay, it's not an experimentation, I actually like men and this is who I am." I didn't fully come out to myself, fully accepting it and everything until I was about 21 or 22.

And it was a fun realization. It was a sense of relief to just be able to say that, and then I told certain friends. I did not tell my family for a couple of years, but I made a really good group of friends, my chosen family at that time, this group of people who accepted me for who I was. And it was very easy, and I had a lot of fun in my early twenties after coming out to them.

When I was 25, I told my family, and the reaction was not so great. I grew up in a religious household, so they were not happy, they were not accepting. I actually didn't talk to my mom and dad for several months after I came out, because some things were said and it was kind of hard. So I was living on my own. I had a roommate. I was living with a roommate, and I reverted back to that chosen family. I left my natural family, and went and did everything with my chosen family for months.

And one night I got a phone call and it was my mother. And she was just calling to say why haven't I reached out to her. And it was tough.

But she made that first step. She reached out. And we sort of repaired the relationship from there. It's had its moments of rockiness, but for the most part, everything is good. Everything is good with my parents now.

John Caher:

I'm glad to hear that. I suspect your experience is more common than uncommon. Is that correct?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

It is. I think it could be considered almost 50/50. Half of the people that I know, their coming out stories do seem similar to mine, but then there is a whole group of people who have a wonderful coming out story.

I went to an LGBT program for the New York City Police Academy a few years ago, and their LGBTQ program focused on coming out stories of officers in the academy or officers in their force. And the reason why they did that was to let everybody know that, A, we're people too, B, this can be difficult and hard, and C, don't make it any harder for us to come out, because we're constantly having to come out. An LGBTQ person is always having to say that they're LGBTQ, somebody's questioning somebody. And it can be difficult.

But when I was watching that program, it was amazing to see the different stories, and some were like mine, and some were worse than mine. Some people had been kicked out from their home and still don't talk to their parents after years and years. Others, they told their parents and their parents were like, "Hey, let's go to the clubs with you. We wholeheartedly accept," and they'll march in a parade with them. I sort of fall somewhere in the middle with my parents.

John Caher:

Do you think it's a generational thing to some extent? I mean, your parents came of age at a time when homosexuality was certainly considered deviant and weird, and you mentioned they were religious. And since the time you came up and came out in the '80s, a whole lot has happened. So, do you think things are transitioning?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

I do think that there has been a lot of change. There is a lot more acceptance. Younger people are more comfortable coming out now, and I think that's wonderful. I look at some people now and think back to when I was 16. Now, I was a teenager in the '80s when the whole AIDS crisis was really prevalent. At that time, I didn't know anyone who was afflicted, or passed away, or was sick, or anything. I didn't know people until I was in my twenties, which was more in the '90s when that started happening in my social circle.

But being a teenager, I look at it now and I think at 16 I started to realize something was different, like I mentioned before, and I actually looked it up in the library and did all these things. I was not comfortable sharing

that even with my sister. I don't think I could have told anybody when I was 16. I don't know what would've happened.

There are so many kids who were kicked out or had committed suicide because of the reaction they got from their parents. And sometimes, I wonder what would've happened to me had I shared that when I was 16. I think everything happened the way it was supposed to. I couldn't tell my family until I was self-sufficient, until I felt strong enough to do it and had, again, that chosen family, those friends that are so close that are a support for you. I look at it that way.

John Caher: I wonder how things would be different if you were turning 16 now rather than in the 1980s.

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

I don't know. I look at my parents now. I think my being the first openly gay person in my family that people are aware of—I'm the first one who in my twenties came out and said, "I am gay." I'm the first one who is married to, in a same sex relationship, got married, has a child. I'm showing them that even though I'm gay, I can have the same kind of life that you do.

I think my paving that pathway in my family would make it easier now. There wasn't anybody before. I'm not saying that there wasn't anybody gay. I'm saying there's nobody who was openly gay. So, I had no one that did it before me. I'm the first one in my family. I think a generation now, if somebody, my nephews, or cousin's kids, or anybody were to say they were (LGBTQ), people in my family would think about me and be like, "Okay, this isn't so terrible." When I did it, they thought it was the end of the world. They were like, "This is just horrible. This is the worst thing that could happen."

And again, like you said, that was their age. That was the culture, being in a Hispanic household. And there was also the religious aspect. So all of those things combined made it very difficult.

John Caher: What does the Hispanic culture have to do with this?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

Especially back then, it's not necessarily accepted or the thing you want for your child. It's wrong. Hispanic culture is generally very, very religious

itself. So it goes back to, "No, no, you can't do that. No, no, no, no, you can't be that way." It's not the most respected.

John Caher: How do you broach that conversation with your parents? "Hey mom, guess what, I'm gay, and what's for dinner?" I mean, how do you get started?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

In my case, I had been pulling away from my family. I had that chosen family, and I'd been doing more and more with them, and questions started happening. I think the people that knew my parents started seeing me with other people that were very, very openly gay. And they started going back and telling my parents, "We saw him and he was here with these people" and whatever. So questions started coming up. And I remember my mother saying something to me, and I turned to her and I was like, "Mom, do you want me to tell you the truth?" And she was like, "I need you to tell me the truth." And I said, "Well then, okay, let's sit down." And I told her, and that's how it happened. That started the conversation, which did not end well. But it was because I was already living a lifestyle and other people were going back and telling my mother.

John Caher: But over time, your family has become accepting?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

Yes. My mother is never satisfied with anybody any of her kids are with. So with my husband, for a long time she didn't like him, but it had nothing to do with being gay. He wasn't "good enough," the same as with my sister and her husband.

John Caher: Where are your parents from?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

My mom is Puerto Rican and my dad is half Spanish and half French.

John Caher: Were they born in the states?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

Yep. Both of them were born in New York City. I am third generation American, New York City born and raised. Their parents were from wherever they came from in New York City. I don't know where they

were born, my grandparents. I'm not quite sure. At that time, I'm sure somebody knows, I just don't. It was another question.

John Caher: So where did you go to school?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

I grew up in New York City. I went to high school in New York City. And then I went to Bronx Community College for a period of time. And then my parents moved.

I tried to go to King's College, and my parents at the time that I had applied to go to King's College and had been accepted, my parents were trying to buy a house, and they told me they couldn't get their house if they had to put me through school. And we never thought about scholarship. We tried FAFSA and it didn't work. I don't know why. They just were like, "We can't do this."

And so I didn't go. And we moved upstate, slightly upstate, into the Hudson Valley, mid-Hudson Valley. And I didn't go back to college for a few years. So I was in my twenties when I went back to school, and I went to SUNY Orange and got an associate's degree there. And then I went from there to Mount Saint Mary College and got a bachelor's degree in communication.

John Caher: Okay. And so what was your first job after school?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

After college?

John Caher: Mm-hmm.

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

I was actually already working for the court system when I went back.

John Caher: Okay. So when you were like 12, was it your dream to someday work for the New York State Unified Court System?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

No! When I was a teenager, when I was just coming up, I loved books, and I had always wanted to work in publishing. I kept saying I want to write or publish books. That's what I wanted to do.

And I actually did a stint for a magazine. I worked for Hachette Filipacchi magazines, working for Elle Decor, and Elle, and a Racing car, which I can't remember the name of the magazine for race cars. I worked for them as an assistant in one of the offices there for about a year, and then decided I didn't want to work for a publishing company, because it was very low pay and a lot of hard work.

John Caher: So how did you end up in the court system?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

I was working for that magazine company, and then I was working at 1010 WINS actually to supplement money there, and I was doing a few other things too on the side. My mother said to me there was a test coming up, a civil service exam that she wanted to take to work for the courts, but she wanted someone to take the test with her so she had support. I was like, "Sure, I'll go take a test with you."

So she signed us up. I went, took the test. And a year or two later, I got a notification in the mail that I had gotten a 98 on the exam, and I didn't even know what test it was. A few days later I got a call from a chief clerk in Poughkeepsie, in Poughkeepsie Family Court, asking if I was interested in a position. And when I asked about the salary, it was more than I was making at Elle and Elle Décor magazines, and the other two things where I was like, "Yeah, I will come for an interview." And that's how it started. And I kept thinking, "I'll do this for a while and I'll go back into publishing," but I ended up staying in the court system.

John Caher: Now you were in the court system for, I don't know, 25 or 30 years before transferring over to ODI. What attracted you to the Office of Diversity & Inclusion?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

Diversity is something that has been special to me, meaningful for me. It was an opportunity to move over. It happened because of COVID, because before I was in ODI, I was in the professional development and training office. And I absolutely love training. Even though I was shy growing up and wanted to fade into the background, I really love standing up in front of a group of people, and talking and teaching, and

trying to get them to understand something. It's something I really love doing, surprising to me, once I started doing that. But that is the truth. I love it.

And when COVID happened, training stopped. And I did some other things in HR to sort of supplement my time, because I didn't want to just sit there. And then they told me that ODI needed someone to do some training for them, and would I be interested in moving over. And I said sure. So that's what brought me over to ODI.

John Caher: And what is it you do at ODI?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

I do a lot of the setup for the programs that we put out. I do some training for them. I still do some professional development work for them. It's still some training. It's a lot of behind the scenes stuff, though. It's more behind scenes stuff here than it was in the professional development office.

John Caher: What's a great day in the professional life of Daniel Santiago-Stewart?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

The best is when I am standing in front of a group of people and they are getting what I am teaching them. That is the best day ever, when I have a room full of people and I am trying to teach them whatever it is, and they're completely understanding where I'm going, what I'm saying, and they're taking it in, and it's making sense to them. Whether it be training them on Word, Microsoft products, or teaching them how to write better, or teaching about diversity and inclusion, or teaching about customer service, no matter what the topic may be. When I'm getting the point across and people are understanding and enjoying how the class is going, that is the best day ever for me.

John Caher: Sounds like you're a natural teacher.

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

There have been times where I've thought, "I did go into the wrong thing. I should have tried"... My sister's a teacher and she and I talk about it all the time and I'm like, "I think I should have followed your footsteps." But I didn't know that back then.

John Caher: Of course. Of course. If you don't mind, I'd like to get to know you a little more on a personal level. I've known you at a professional level for a while, but I don't know that much personal. So where did you meet your husband?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

We joke and say we met on the phone. I had a very good friend in the town where my husband grew up, and my husband was friends with him. They were neighbors. And on Friday nights, my friend would host movie nights and have people from the town come over, and they'd all watch movies.

And one Friday night, I was having an argument with the person I was dating at that time, and I called up my friend. And this guy picked up the phone and I asked, "Who are you?" And he made me laugh because he said, "Who am I? Who are you? You called me." I chuckled. We laughed. He gave the phone to my friend and I asked my friend, "Who was that?" And he was like, "That's my neighbor."

So the next Friday I called again to see if he would pick up the phone, and he picked up the phone, and we chatted for a little bit. And we did that for about four Fridays in a row. And on the fifth Friday when he picked up, I told him, "Tell Greg," — who's my friend — "tell him I'm coming over." And I went so I could see who he was, because I wanted to meet him. And that's how we met. So we met on the phone.

John Caher: That's great. So tell me about your family.

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

I have a 17-year-old son who I adore. His name is Benjamin. We just got notified that he was accepted to the Culinary Institute. So he is going to The Culinary Institute of America next September! He is in his final year of high school. He is really excited about that and we're really happy for him. He's been talking about doing that since he was a child. When he was four years old, we found out that you can buy a plastic kid's butcher knife, which we had to buy for him because all he wanted to do was chop vegetables. He wanted to be a sous-chef when he was four and five years old. So we bought him a plastic butcher knife so he could cut the vegetables for us that we would use when we were cooking.

He is my heart, I have to say. My husband, who I've been with for almost 24 years now, we met 24 years ago on the phone, is a wonderful man.

Just like everybody in a relationship, he drives me crazy, but I love him to death.

John Caher: So what makes you happy?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

When you ask me that question, I'm thinking of what a good day would be. And I think of snowy days on the couch with a cup of hot chocolate watching a movie is always the perfect setting. That's always what I think of when somebody says, "What do you want to do? What's kind of fun and comfortable for you?" And that's what I think of as a happy day for me, just relaxing, and enjoying, and watching movies, and sitting with family or friends, and just kind of being content. That is what makes me happy.

John Caher: That sounds very nice. So if you only had a few moments, a few seconds to tell someone about to hop on a subway car the most important thing to know about Dan, what is it?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

That despite being a small shy kid, I was always strong. I'm a very strong person. There are times where I feel like I have a ton of things on my shoulders. And then there are days where I feel like I can take on the world. But I kind of know that I can get through anything.

John Caher: You think that strength is a factor of the challenges you had to overcome growing up?

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

Definitely. Having a secret about myself for my entire childhood and teen years made me try and be self-reliant. It's the only way I could think about it. I was always self-reliant. I had to be self-reliant. And then when I did come out to my family, I had to be even stronger, because I didn't want them to hurt me.

So I've always had to be strong. I've always felt like I've had to do it on my own. I put myself through college. My parents couldn't. They told me that it was either my going to college or them getting a house. So I had to do it on my own. I feel like that's been a constant thing in my life. They're wonderful parents, don't get me wrong. I love my parents, and they love me. They had their own struggles. It just made me feel like, well, I have to

do things for myself. I have to be my own person. And that's the way I am.

John Caher: If that hadn't happened, if you hadn't had those struggles, if you hadn't had those difficulties with your parents, you probably would not be the person that you are. And you strike me as a happy person.

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

I am definitely a happy person. I really am. I like being the strong person. I think if my relationship with my parents was still bad, I wouldn't be as happy. But we've mended it, and I'm fine. I just had my whole family over at my house for Thanksgiving just two weeks ago. The entire clan was there, and it was so much fun. And I was just talking with one of them, with my cousin, yesterday as a matter of fact. And she said, "We had so much fun at Thanksgiving. It was so great to come here," and blah, blah, blah. So I'm good with my family, I'm good with everyone. So I am happy. Things could have been easier, but I don't regret what happened because I am who I am because of it. I am strong because of it.

John Caher: What a wonderful way to end. And Dan, thank you so much for your time, and thank you for what you do for the court system. It was a pleasure talking to you this morning.

Dan Santiago-Stewart:

Thank you so much.