

# Many Hands Make Light Work

By MICHELLE DUPREY



**F**or more than 15 years, a few other lawyers with disabilities and I have been pushing the legal profession in Connecticut to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion for lawyers with disabilities. Often, we are singular voices. Disability is not part of most DEI conversations, especially if we are not in the room.

Let's start with the statistics: people with disabilities make up about 25 percent of the American population, about 50 percent of people over the age 65 have one or more disabilities, and yet, in the latest CBA survey on diversity, only one percent of lawyers identify themselves as having a disability. Disability is a protected class that anyone can enter at any time by accident, illness, or age. There are

certainly barriers to the profession for diverse groups, particularly people living with a disability who must craft creative ways to work in this profession. There's discrimination and fear of those living with hidden disabilities. And there's a misconception that disability means those with the most visible disabilities, like using a wheelchair or a guide dog to mitigate the effect of their impairment.

Last summer, I was a presenter at a Connecticut Legal Conference session where participants were asked if they had a disability at the start of the session and at the end. After educating attendees on what disability means under the Americans with Disabilities Act, more attendees identified as having a disability at the end. When you ask people if they have

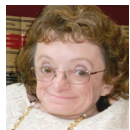
a health condition (physical or psychological) that affects one or more major life activities, those numbers naturally go up because, in their minds, it is different than what people see as having a "disability."

There are many lawyers living with health conditions that meet those criteria and yet they don't self-identify as having a disability. Disability pride, while long discussed in the disability rights community, has not made it to our mainstream culture yet. Should we be proud of being lawyers with disabilities? I say yes. Many attorneys that have worked with a hearing loss, a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis, major depression, and on and on, should be proud that those extra hurdles made them a better person and possibly a bet-

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ter lawyer. I challenge those lawyers today to speak up, to raise your hand when asked if you are a diverse lawyer.

My goal before the end of my career is that I and my current roster of vocal lawyers with disabilities are no longer the only ones in the room asking about disability diversity, making sure all lawyers with various disabilities are valued and given valuable opportunities. Opportunities our current small group may not have had for ourselves in our careers but hope that with the help of those of you now realizing you have a disability; you raise your voice to increase disability diversity in the legal profession because many hands make light work. ■



*Michelle Duprey is the Deputy Corporation Counsel, Office of the Corporation Counsel for the City of New Haven and a long-time disability rights lawyer, trainer, public speaker, and advocate.*



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