

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

My Former Boss was a Lion

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Barney Frank and I had the same boss, and the lion just died. His name was Kevin White, the legendary Mayor of Boston in the late, turbulent 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s. He was the most important city advocate for gay people in the country when I worked for him from 1982 to 1984.

Boston wasn't Narnia, but the administration worked to make it as close to Camelot as you got in the period of national racial turmoil and anti-war anger, and the Mayor was the city's visionary, ruling lion. Kevin White pried open the doors of white Irish domination of "the Hub" and brought into government the best and brightest minds of all races, genders, faiths, and orientations. One of his protégés was Barney Frank, whom the Mayor talked out of an academic career and into one of political public service. The people who surrounded the Mayor, such as Frank, and my brother Tom, were referred to as "goo-goos" for "good government" men and women.

I was another of White's "goo-goos," serving as his liaison to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community, which at the time was referred to simply as the "gay and lesbian community." In 1982, I was the first full-time person to hold such a position in the country. In that capacity, I started the first urban task force on AIDS. We wrote safe-sex guidelines and blood donation rules in Boston City Hall when there were only three official cases of HIV in the Commonwealth. With the Mayor's blessing, Boston was also the first city to appoint a full-time police liaison to the gay and lesbian community. He was a straight man named Lt. Donald Devine, who was incessantly teased by his straight colleagues in the police department. Devine was undaunted, and stood vigilant at every Gay Pride Parade. When my older brother died in a gun accident, Devine sent a sympathy card indicating a mass would be said in Michael's honor. A straight, Irish Catholic cop went out of his way to comfort an openly gay man.

None of this may sound impressive today, when state legislatures are voting for marriage equality, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people not only can serve openly in the military, but are often tapped to host the Emmys and the Oscars. But all of these great steps forward for our community in the early 1980s happened at a time when AIDS was still referred to as GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency) and when Jerry Falwell focused his new Moral Majority organization on demonizing gay people. Gay men were labeled as carriers of a deadly disease, and many people feared sitting next to us on airplanes, or having us hold their children. Closeted gay people in City Hall feared having lunch with me when I was the liaison. Hostile people threw cherry bombs at Gay Pride marchers.

In 1983, Mayor Kevin White also approved the first study of a city's gay demographics, and of the lesbian and gay community's needs. Hundreds of hours of testimony given at panel hearings on the police, hospital, neighborhood, education, and women's services were transcribed into *The Boston Project* report. It provided a blueprint on how a city could better meet the needs of its lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender constituents.

It is undoubtedly and regrettably true that young, gay people who read newspaper or online obits, have no idea how Kevin White impacted the freedom and safety we all experience today. It makes me sad that there is often so little interest in our history among the muscled boys who dance year-round at the circuit parties. I don't want to deny them their joy, but I also hope that they and others will occasionally stop when they read of the death of a community pioneer, and feel sad and grateful for that person's life.

Though not gay, Mayor Kevin White, the lion of Boston in the late 1960s to the early 1980s, was an ally who enabled many of us to make significant inroads in a culture that feared and often loathed us.

Thank you, Kevin White.