

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

Giving to Nice People

Posted: 15 November 2011, 8:55AM

There are two sets of cousins who play on our beach in Provincetown each summer. The two brothers are very polite, attentive, and grateful. Their cousins, a boy and a girl, never say, "Hello," "Please," or "Thank you," even when prodded by their embarrassed parents. It's easy for me to give popsicles and Fudgesicles to the young brothers, to take them out on the boat, and to have splash fights with them. It's a lot less easy for me to do the same for their cousins. I do it so that they don't feel left out, but I don't enjoy it.

The other day, as I was waiting in traffic, a young man with the *Homeless Voice* in his hands was walking between cars with a nervous smile on his face. It was apparent from his face how uncomfortable he was asking for money.

"That's hard work," I said to him as I handed him a dollar. "It can't be easy for you to do."

"Thanks," he smiled with relief. "Believe me; I wouldn't do this if I didn't have to."

Some people, regardless of their age or circumstance, are easy and fun to give to. They stop and pay attention to what is being offered to them. They show pleasure and express gratitude for the gift or kind gesture. And they seem to care how you feel. Grumpy, self-centered, impolite, and ungrateful people are much less fun or easy to show kindness to.

Some Wall Street bankers can be really fun to be kind to, not because they'll give you anything but a smile in return, but simply because they're nice people. The same is true of some superstars in sports, entertainment, and the fine arts. Not all poor people, spiritual people, or liberal Democrats are easy to give to, especially when they expect to receive something from you. And I've even met one or two socially conservative Republicans, believe it or not, who are appreciative of kindness, even from a gay man.

The group that is hardest for me to get my arms around is lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender leaders, or people of means, who feel that they are owed something. Their sacrifices, their fame, or their money somehow merits deference, constant gratitude, and special attention. It's really hard for me to be obsequious to rich, gay people, or to those with political influence, just to get help in an important, community, non-profit project.

And then there are the ones who you would never know are rich, famous, or influential, because of their kindness and thoughtfulness to others. They usually don't need to be asked. They see the need and they offer help.

Elaine Noble is such a person. Though she doesn't care, she'll be remembered in our history books as the first openly gay person to be elected to a state legislature, something she did in Massachusetts

in 1974. She is the daughter of a Pennsylvania coal miner, and has been courted by a coterie of famous lesbian, gay, and feminist historic personalities such as Harvey Milk, Bella Abzug, Gloria Steinem, Jane Fonda, and Lily Tomlin. But you wouldn't know it from talking with her. Elaine created the country's first position of mayoral gay liaison, started "Gay Way," Boston's first gay radio program, and represented the U.S. gay community at the first international community gatherings and White House meetings. Elaine ran for the U.S. Senate, started the Pride Institute, an alcohol rehabilitation center for the gay community, and has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for lesbian and gay candidates and causes. In addition, she's a really nice person: polite, kind, appreciative, interested, and gracious.

When Elaine was with Ray and me for the weekend, along with Fort Worth City Councilor and all-around nice guy Joel Burns, we insisted she allow us to pamper her with smoothies, good food, and neck massages. She and Joel came to Fort Lauderdale for the Stonewall National Museum's "Our Stars" exhibition. She received Stonewall's Heritage Award, as has Frank Kameny, Barbara Gittings, and Barney Frank. Now 68, and fighting a bum knee, she graciously made an effort to meet and show an interest in every person who attended the fundraiser in our home. Afterwards, as a group of us sat in the living room eating ice cream sundaes, Elaine shared stories of her recent work in Albania and elsewhere to create safe spaces for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. But she also asked everyone else about themselves.

Fame and fortune don't make us worthy of attention. It's our shared humanity that makes us a candidate for kindness. But it's never owed, and it should always be greatly appreciated.