
Hughes Hubbard & Reed

HHR Pride Co-Chair Fulfills Passion for LGBTQ+ Activism

News & Events | Diversity

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A native of Ridgewood, N.J., Vanessa Woods arrived at Hughes Hubbard as an associate in June 2013. She joined the firm's Committee on Diversity and Inclusion in June 2019 and became co-chair of HHR Pride in early 2020.

Why is diversity important to you?

I used to believe the world was a meritocracy but it's become very apparent that there are inequalities built into the system which keep certain groups from achieving the same success as majority groups despite equal work and talent. I think it's critical that we all work to expand our worldviews and drive towards a much more inclusive global society as opposed to the individualism that isolates and harms us as a society.

What challenges have you faced as a diverse lawyer and how did you overcome them?

I first want to name the privilege I have been afforded as a cis-gender white person in this system. The challenges I face as a diverse lawyer manifest in relationship to my gender. I identify as a woman and use she/her pronouns. Unfortunately, gender parity at work across most industries has a long way to go. Studies have shown that representation of women decreases rapidly at post-associate levels. I personally have faced numerous situations where I have been assumed to be less intelligent or less accomplished simply because I am female. I make it a point to support and collaborate with other female-identifying professionals as much as possible so that we collectively can raise each other up.

Why did you get involved with the Committee on Diversity and Inclusion?

I have always wanted to play a bigger role in supporting diverse employees at Hughes Hubbard & Reed, but wasn't sure how to participate without infringing on safe spaces. I have been an ally of the LGBTQ+ community for as long as I can remember. When my sister came out as queer about two years ago, it deepened the conversations I was having around these issues and further stoked my passion for LGBTQ+ activism. Thus, I joined the LGBTQ+ affinity group, especially since current friend and former HHR associate Danny Nuzzaci was

the then-co-chair. After Danny left the firm, I was happy to take over his position as co-chair and I'm excited about the accomplishments our group has in store for the future!

What's the best way for a law firm to increase the number of diverse attorneys?

One word: NETWORKING. Most people tend to network within their demographic; men network with men, white people network with white people, straight people network with straight people. On some level this makes sense, because networking is about finding commonalities. However, networking often results in jobs which means the majority groups are hiring members of the majority groups through their own network, effectively shutting out members of oppressed groups that are not only as talented and qualified but would also provide the other benefits that a diverse working environment can provide. I think it's very important that HHR attorneys who belong to majority groups make serious efforts to expand their networks beyond their own race/religion/gender/sexual identity/etc.

What are the short-term and long-term goals for the group?

The group reached one short-term milestone by choosing a newname: HHR Pride. Additionally, we have multiple projects in the works for next year's Pride which will be revealed in due time. In the long term, we are driving towards tangible increased diversity. This will manifest in both increased numbers of LGBTQ+ employees and clients and in support for our existing LGBTQ+ colleagues and clients.

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Vanessa A. Woods