

# DEI is Not Just Race and Gender

I am a half-Asian woman. By legal industry standards, I'm "diverse." While I certainly have experienced bias in the past (and still do in my everyday life), I generally don't feel marginalized by my diversity – especially in working at Jaffe, where our differences are celebrated and diverse outlooks encouraged.

But a diagnosis in my family has made disability part of my everyday life, and makes it clear that this "invisible" aspect of diversity is one that needs more attention.

Many law firms are making strides to improve diversity, equity and inclusion, which is important. Clients often ask me to seek out awards and rankings opportunities to help them receive recognition for their DEI initiatives. However, I've realized that these initiatives are often focused only on the visible, physical definitions of race and gender, and overlook the ones that aren't immediately visible, such as disabilities, sexual orientation or economic disadvantages.

It's critical for law firms to reflect the communities they represent and provide opportunities for career success to people, not just of all genders and races, but less-obvious underrepresented communities that also deserve equity and inclusion.

Here is a little bit of my story, along with rankings opportunities for law firms that support the inclusion of people from a range of marginalized communities.

## The Diagnosis that Changed My Life

While race and gender are usually obvious when you meet a person face-to-face, a disability, sexual orientation or background from impoverished circumstances are not, so for many law firms, out of sight, out of mind. That goes for many of us in our daily lives. Including me, until recently.

My husband was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) in April 2023. He was 37 at the time, and our children were 4 and 6.

Although ALS is a brain disease, the symptoms are physical. Navigating this illness, I learned that once a disability is part of your everyday life, you start to notice things. First, as you conduct your daily life, you begin to pay attention to disability.

This started at home. I work remotely and my desk is conveniently located in my living room. However, now I had to think about the eventuality of a wheelchair being in our future. The house has to be reconfigured for that, and rooms changed around.

I've begun to notice how the wheelchair will become a challenge in public settings as simple as grocery stores and restaurants. When my children were young, we lived in Chicago and just navigating a stroller was a challenge. Things will be harder with a



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It's tough to balance what is appropriate to mention in the workplace with maintaining privacy for my family, so I won't go into more detail about my personal life. I'm not sharing this for sympathy or support, but to bring awareness to this aspect of DEI that, I feel, isn't spoken about.

Perhaps there is a stigma about those with disabilities? Or we as humans are uncomfortable discussing things that we can't change or empathize with?

I realize there are many legal implications related to discussing disabilities (hence the Voluntary Self-Identification of Disability included when applying for a job), but I've noticed the conversations about disabilities and workplace accommodations are not very prevalent. Often, disability statistics are not included or highlighted in law firm presentations, award submissions or responses to RFPs.

However, there are surveys, rankings and awards submissions that do recognize this category of diversity, as well as others.

## A List of DEI Rankings and Awards for Lawyers and Law Firms

My role at Jaffe is mostly defined by marketing – specifically [rankings](#). While I'm regularly asked by firms to identify rankings opportunities specific to location or practice area, the opportunities for DEI-focused awards have been increasing and will continue to grow.

- [Chambers and Partners D&I Awards](#) close in mid-February. This detailed submission asks for information about diversity that can relate to ethnicity and gender, as well as disability, age, faith, neurodiversity, social mobility and more.
- The [Seramount Best Companies Survey](#) opens in December and closes in mid-March. This organization has been surveying organizations committed to women's advancement and family-friendly workplace culture since 1986, and I respect the depth of its survey.
- ALM/Law.com's [Women in Power and Law Awards](#) nominations open in March, with a deadline in June. This is a widely respected legal publication that recognizes exceptional attorneys who identify as women.
- Submissions for the [American Bar Association - Diversity Leadership Award](#) are usually due in February. The Litigation Section Diversity Leadership Award recognizes individuals or entities having demonstrated a commitment to promoting full and equal participation in the legal profession through the encouragement and inclusion of women, minorities, people with disabilities, and/or people of differing sexual orientations and gender identities.
- Several city *Business Journals* have awards that honor outstanding organizations and outspoken individuals who are going above and beyond to bolster equality in all areas of diversity, including age, disability, gender, sexual orientation, race and religion. Some of these include:
  - [Baltimore Business Journal Leaders in Diversity Awards](#) (due in early April)
  - [Dallas Business Journal Leaders in Diversity Awards](#) (deadline often in December)

- [Houston Business Journal Leaders in Diversity Awards](#) (deadline often in January)
- [Orlando Business Journal Diversity in Business Awards](#) (deadline in March)
- [St. Louis Business Journal Champions for Diversity & Inclusion Awards](#) (deadline in early June)

For law firms that want to improve their diversity, there are certifications like [Diversity Lab's Mansfield Rule](#) or the [Leadership Council on Legal Diversity](#), which are helping to keep law firms accountable and trying to create movement and change in the legal industry.

## Change Happens Together

Dealing with a devastating diagnosis has made my day-to-day life and future much more challenging, and it can be very isolating.

Fortunately, I recently had the pleasure of attending a conference that was focused on driving diversity and encouraging tough conversations that must continue to happen. I left that conference hopeful and invigorated with the sense that there is a willingness to have these conversations, especially for those who might feel their opportunities are limited.

I'm relatively new to life with someone with a disability and always eager to learn more and expand my support network. In the end, working together with the goal of advancing all aspects of diversity, equity and inclusion should be a priority for each and every one of us. We never know who is struggling or might need a little empathy. As a mom of two young kids, one of the most important lessons I try to teach is to be kind to everyone.

If you're interested in supporting research for ALS, please visit the nonprofit I AM ALS at [www.IAmALS.org](http://www.IAmALS.org). Founded by ALS patient Brian Wallach and his wife, Sandra Abrevaya, I AM ALS is revolutionizing how we cure ALS by empowering and mobilizing patients, engaging with policymakers and offering vital resources for people affected by ALS.

I encourage anyone who would like to help advance the conversation related to those with disabilities in the legal industry to reach out to me, [eokeefe@jaffepr.com](mailto:eokeefe@jaffepr.com), if you'd like to discuss anything from this article (or in life).