

Stroock Partner Talks Bar Award, Diversity Work As An Ally

By **Emma Cueto**

Law360 (January 26, 2023, 9:56 AM EST) -- After receiving the Diversity Trailblazer Award from the New York State Bar Association's Committee on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, a partner at Stroock & Stroock & Lavan LLP spoke to Law360 Pulse about the award, the diversity work happening at Stroock, and the nature of doing diversity work as an ally.

Ross F. Moskowitz, a real estate partner at Stroock, is the chair of the firm's Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Council and has long been involved in the diversity work at the firm. He was presented with the John E. Higgins Diversity Trailblazer Award at the NYSBA Annual Meeting on Jan 18, which is meant to recognize "exceptional efforts of a member of the legal community to promote the full and equal participation of diverse people at all levels of the legal profession."



Ross F. Moskowitz

Moskowitz told Law360 that it was important for allies to be actively involved in the effort to promote diversity, equity and inclusion and law firms. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

What sort of work do you do at Stroock on DEI?

At the firm, I chair the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Council, and I've been involved in the group — what we used to call the committee and now call the council — since we created it, sometime around 2004. Not that we were ahead of the game necessarily, but we realized early, looking at the numbers and the pipeline, that we needed to get focused on this and more importantly change the way folks are thinking.

We decided we wanted folks from all walks of life on this committee, and I think it remains the most integrated committee in terms of levels; we have junior associates to senior partners. We also have members of all different races, religions, and so on. It's not a huge committee, but everyone has a different lens and different life experience. And from my perspective, it's really important to get those lenses. I work very hard at being inclusive — and that's not a pun — and getting everyone's viewpoint.

I think that the corporate world was ahead of the game on this and law firms are playing catch up. And there's been great strides in the law firm community, but there's still a lot of work to do.

What are some of the things happening at the firm? How does the firm approach DEI work?

So one thing I developed was our affinity groups. I looked at them as a way to bring commonality and more awareness. The groups got started on their own, and are deliberately chaired or co-chaired by attorneys who aren't partners yet. They have to come to the table with an idea of what they want to do with the group, and they evolved very naturally. We have an attorneys of color group, an LGBT group, a working families group. And the idea was to have something for everyone.

The underlying theme here for me is always creating a community, a community where everyone feels comfortable. That helps work/life balance, and it also candidly helps retention. If you look at it from a business perspective, which I don't, but if you want to: Creating community is only going to help people stay.

And for instance, the working families group helped redevelop some of our family needs policies. Some members of that group don't have children yet, but it helps them know what the policies are. Or a few years ago, I helped two of our associates start a health and wellness group. Pre-pandemic, they orchestrated weekly meditation sessions, monthly yoga sessions, they brought in a nutritionist — things they knew people wanted.

And groups are available to everybody. I sit on the Stroock LGBTQ group, and that was to help show allies that you don't have to fit into a category to get involved in a group and work on those issues. And you also make really good connections. You get to know people outside your department, and I think those are some of the most important things we do.

And continuing that openness is how I think of this. I'm a strong believer in learning and learning from others. And I think that the DEI work is the most important thing I do at the firm.

Another thing we did a few years ago was that we noticed there was a lot of activity in the diversity space by diverse attorneys, and asked if that was an undue burden. And we came up with the idea for DEI activities to qualify as billable hours. So instead of treating them as pro bono hours, which don't always go into our billable hours, we treated them as billable, for up to 50 hours.

And that was a recognition by the firm that this is very important, so important that even if there isn't a dollar amount tied to it, we're going to treat it as though there is. And I do like to think we were ahead on that one.

What are some of the goals that you have or challenges that remain at Stroock?

One goal is amplifying diverse voices and providing platforms to promote full and equal participation for everyone, of all backgrounds and at all levels. That's an objective for us and for me, as an ally. That's my commitment, to find and provide these opportunities.

And it's so important to continue to be open to learning. For instance, I don't know that I fully appreciated the significance of the Name-Change Project — which provides pro bono name change services to trans people — until I was talking to my daughter about one of her friends who was transitioning and understood the significance of a name change to them. And I took that new perspective back to the firm and to the people at the firm trying to get the Name-Change Project off the ground.

So continuing to learn is always important.

What was your reaction to getting the award from NYSBA?

That's a really hard question. I was extremely grateful. The nomination came from a group of folks at my office at varying levels, and it certainly means a lot to me that they felt strongly enough to write the letters of support. So gratitude is at the top of the list.

And there's also that question of, "Do I deserve this?" I've done well in my real estate career and received awards, but this is obviously different. So there's a bit of discomfort — of being grateful but also thinking "Are you sure?"

But that said, at the award ceremony, afterwards, someone on the committee at NYSBA came over to me and spent some time with me and said, "Listen, I want you in the room. You're a guy who can make things happen. You're utilizing your success and your power to promote DEI. You're using your success and your power in the way an ally is supposed to."

So that made me feel pretty good. And whatever my initial hesitation, I certainly was extremely proud to be up there. It was one of the more memorable moments in my career, to be honest.

As we head into 2023, what are some things you expect to see or hope to see with regards to DEI?

Well, it's hard to prognosticate. But I think law firms — and everyone — is looking at a potential recession, and I would like to say that we should still be doubling down on our DEI efforts as an industry. Now is not the time to let up. Now is the time to push — if for no other reason, then because clients are demanding it.

It's the right thing to do, and it's also good business sense.

--Editing by Alyssa Miller.