

10 QUESTIONS

for

Amber Hikes

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE MAYOR'S OFFICE OF LGBT AFFAIRS

INTERVIEW BY BRIAN MCGINNIS

Amber Hikes is the executive director of the Mayor's Office of LGBT Affairs for the City of Philadelphia, where she develops policy and serves as the principal advisor to Mayor Kenney on issues that affect the LGBTQ community.

At the Mayor's Office, Amber has set her sights on advocating for the most vulnerable populations within the LGBTQ community—specifically youth, elders, transgender people, and people of color—and believes in employing an intersectional lens in all aspects of government and community work.

BRIAN MCGINNIS: Tell me a little bit about the City of Philadelphia Office of LGBT Affairs, and how many similar government offices are there nationwide?

AMBER HIKES: Our mission is to foster equal living and working conditions for LGBTQ Philadelphians. In the past, we were predominantly a policy office. Mayor Jim Kenney said policy is important, but if people don't feel connected to it, then what good is it? Our call was then to be more outward-facing. We've gone from being strictly policy-focused to being the most outward-facing, community-engaged office of LGBT affairs in the country. We're also protected under the city charter.

There are only four offices of LGBT affairs, which is shocking. The other offices are in Washington D.C.; Santa

Clara County, California; and, most recently, Union County, New Jersey.

What experiences have prepared you for this role, and how do you approach your work?

I never saw myself in a place of government, although I've always been a political buff. I saw myself much more rooted in community and did not initially see how those worlds could come together. I started at the Attic Youth Center in Philadelphia 12 years ago doing social work. While that work was inspiring every day, there were significant bureaucratic

challenges that make frontline work frustrating.

When I was working with folks from so many marginalized identities, predominantly young LGBTQ people of color, there were so many systems that were not competent or equipped to serve their best interests.

So after working with Attic Youth Center, I was able to work with Equality PA, then Equality Advocates and worked with the Youth Law project there. That was an opportunity to pair up with an attorney to understand more about young people's legal concerns, and help advocate for them. Specifically, in Philadelphia, at that time, we witnessed a rise of anti-LGBTQ bullying in schools. The administrators often weren't addressing issues appropriately or sometimes at all.

We also noticed LGBTQ young people of color being overpoliced in certain parts of the city. During college nights





In the past, we were predominantly a policy office. Mayor Jim Kenney said policy is important, but if people don't feel connected to it, then what good is it? Our call was then to be more outward-facing. We've gone from being strictly policy-focused to being the most outward-facing, community-engaged office of LGBT affairs in the country.

at Woody's, there were young kids of color hanging out on the sidewalk in front of the club. We found that those young people were being harassed, and in some cases detained by the police for "obstructing the highway." Interestingly, folks with very different identities, like the straight white guys that were hanging out at the Irish bar or the pizza shop nearby, were not being harassed. Sometimes, those folks were openly drunk and belligerent and even urinating in public. We took this as an opportunity to have conversations with police departments and educate them about engaging with LGBTQ youth of color, and how they could better serve that population rather than overpolice them.

After this opportunity, I was fortunate to serve on several boards, including the William Way Community Center, as well as organize with the Philadelphia Dyke March for 10 years.

I strongly believe that anyone doing outward-facing advocacy work needs to have some foundational understanding about the communities they're working in. Being black, queer and a woman – I'm able to tap into communities that are not

often reflected. When I say reflected, I mean literally reflected in this office and in this position before me. I was the first black woman, and the youngest person, to do this job.

When I receive phone calls from community members, I'm experiencing their identities with them, especially if those identities align with mine. I'm also very aware of the identities I don't hold, making sure that those identities are represented in my office. There needs to be diversity of experience around the table to meet people where they are.

What does it mean to you to follow in the footsteps of your predecessor, the late Gloria Casarez?

Gloria was a mentor and an inspiration. Gloria was such a force. We had worked together organizing the Philadelphia Dyke March and we were queer women of color in this community.

She was guided by a passion that was pure and clear, and since her passing, she guides me in everything that I do. I remember Gloria and think of her every day. I have a pin that



says “WWGD,” what would Gloria do? She led this office during what I call “peace time.” We are now in “war time.” It feels like we are constantly under attack, and I often call out to Gloria for her guidance. She said, “The activists are always right.” I think it was a way to remind herself where she came from. When you get to a place in politics after organizing work or advocacy, your surroundings and influences are very different. Even if you don’t agree with their methods, put the methods aside and listen to what they’re saying.

You’ve spoken about the need for LGBTQ advocacy to be intersectional. How do you define that, and why is it so crucial?

Diversity is what you have, and inclusion is what you do. Acknowledge the diversity of the people at the table. Inclusion takes that a step further. Make sure that you’re getting, and including, the perspectives of those at the table. Intersectionality takes that another step further and centers around understanding how layers of oppression intersect in a person’s experience. It’s understanding that you and I have very different identities. We have moved through the world differently, and those oppressions have affected us differently. That affects how we show up to spaces and how we contribute. We need to address these issues from an equitable place to make space for folks who have not had an opportunity to have their experiences heard.

Some might think that the Supreme Court’s marriage equality decision means the fight for LGBTQ equality and justice has been won. From where you sit today, what are the most urgent, front-line issues facing the LGBTQ community?

Where I sit today is in Philadelphia, in Pennsylvania, which does not have statewide antidiscrimination legislation protecting LGBTQ people. Pennsylvania is an island of inequality in that way. In Pennsylvania, you can still be fired, kicked out of your home and discriminated against in places

of public accommodation for being LGBTQ. We must get the Pennsylvania Fairness Act passed through the legislature as soon as possible. The act would update the state’s non-discrimination law to explicitly include protections for LGBTQ people from discrimination at work, in housing and in public places.

Marriage was incredibly important, but if that is the only concern you have, it demonstrates profound privilege. I have been privileged in the positions that I’ve had, working at California State University, Long Beach and the University of Pennsylvania. These academic institutions put antidiscrimination legislation on the books ages ago, so I couldn’t be fired for being LGBTQ. That’s a privilege other folks don’t have. An even greater privilege is that I live in Philadelphia. We’ve had antidiscrimination laws on the books for 30 years in this city, but you can step right over the city line and that’s not the case. For me, passing the Pennsylvania Fairness Act is a priority.

Your office has prioritized providing educational resources on LGBTQ issues to the broader community. Why are they important?

We have found that people mean well, but they need to have more information. Our resources are quick access for folks on how to best serve LGBTQ people. We have guides for educators, counselors, members of law enforcement who are interacting with members of the trans community and for homeless services.

Can you tell me about the “More Colors, More Pride” campaign, what inspired it, and the redesign of the Pride flag?

We struggle with racism in the LGBTQ community, and not just in Philadelphia. But Philadelphia is a city of activists and we are a city of organizers who take the “birthplace of freedom” distinction seriously. More than 30 years ago, there was a report on racism in Philadelphia’s Gayborhood, and it



documented some of the same practices we see today. It was put on the mayor's desk at that time and, unfortunately, not much was done with it.

Two years ago, these problems caught wind again. There was a video that was released of the owner of iCandy nightclub making slurs about black people. There were protests and boycotts, but it wasn't just about bars and nightclubs. We had serious discriminatory problems in the nonprofits and businesses serving our community. There was a call to address this from a substantive approach, and there were changes in leadership and policy.

I also wanted to attack it symbolically. We took this symbol of the LGBTQ community, the rainbow flag, and we did a very simple thing. We added two stripes—one black and one brown—to represent our solidarity with LGBTQ people of color and their stories that have been erased or whitewashed for years.

We brought it to Mayor Kenney. He said, "Oh, wow. This is a game changer." We took it to city council and they loved it. We took it to the Commission on LGBT Affairs and members openly cried. It was a simple symbol, but it was an opportunity to say boldly that we're standing in solidarity with marginalized people who have been silenced and gaslighted for years within their own community.

We raised the new flag here at City Hall on a Thursday and by Friday, it had gone national, then international. While it was incredibly well received, there was a bit of a backlash because the story that was told lacked local context. People

We took this symbol of the LGBTQ community, the rainbow flag, and we did a very simple thing. We added two stripes – one black and one brown – to represent our solidarity with LGBTQ people of color and their stories that have been erased or whitewashed for years.

said, "This is the first time I'm hearing about racism in the LGBTQ community." "That's not a thing." "Gay people are marginalized themselves." "They can't discriminate."

Of course, LGBTQ people can discriminate against people of color in the same way that people of color can discriminate against LGBTQ people. Some very challenging conversations came out of that and, overwhelmingly, the response was positive. People said, "Oh, God. It's about time." Or some people said, "I didn't feel as connected to the rainbow flag before and I didn't quite know why. But I feel connected to this and I can wave it."

What's beautiful and inspiring is that a year later, we see the flag everywhere from the headquarters of the Human Rights Campaign in Washington D.C. to the Met Gala in New York.

Speaking of pride, what accomplishments of your office are you most proud of?

We hosted the first-ever LGBTQ State of the Union in Philadelphia, a groundbreaking event that moved us and moved the needle toward further accountability, transparency and accessibility of our community leaders.

I'm also proud of the Pride Month events that we hosted in 2018. We took an intersectional approach to what pride means for our community. We recognized that pride isn't accessible for everyone, especially here in Philadelphia. Not everybody has money to get into Penn's Landing. Our elders don't necessarily want to be out in 90-degree June heat. Some people are sober, and there's a substantial drinking culture around pride.

We decided to blow pride out for the whole month of June. There were art exhibits, night market events, panels and movie screenings. We did an intergenerational panel, with folks as young as 14 years old, and folks who were as old as 80 talking about what pride has looked like for them throughout their lives.

What can lawyers in Philadelphia do to be better allies to the LGBTQ community?

As we know, the law can be inherently and intentionally inaccessible, and I think lawyers work hard to try to bridge some



of those gaps for under-resourced individuals. Unfortunately, there's a history of homophobia and transphobia in the justice system which makes it very hard at times for LGBTQ people to feel comfortable or connected with the legal process.

Lawyers can help break down some of that inaccessibility through continuing education. We've provided CLEs with the city's law department, and there are resources online. We encourage lawyers to reach out to us to help make sure they're keeping updated on the language they're using and the way they're interacting with folks, specifically with our trans community. It can be name changes for trans folks, expungement clinics for some of our trans women who have histories in sex work and other street-based economies. We'll also be hosting some advance-planning clinics for low-income LGBTQ seniors in partnership with SeniorLAW Center.

What can we look forward to in the weeks and months ahead, and what issues need more attention?

Our office addresses issues from four lenses: policy, advocacy, community engagement and education. Looking ahead with policy, we'll be working with the Office of Homeless Services, specifically, making more trans-inclusive policies for its emergency shelters. The mayor also has an exciting initiative with municipal IDs. We're going to make sure that those municipal IDs have either a third or fourth gender marker so folks can identify or not identify their gender, or identify as nonbinary. We know other cities have done this before us, and it's long overdue here. We're working on that at the state level, as well.

We're going to help city departments become more LGBTQ-inclusive, updating their internal forms and offering LGBTQ

competency for agencies who desire to create more inclusive environments for employees and Philadelphia residents alike. We'll continue our Community Conversations and our LGBTQ foster parent recruitment events. There are many ways for folks to get involved.

Also, our office will launch a leadership pipeline in October, in time for LGBT History Month. This will be a historic opportunity to diversify our leadership in the LGBTQ community, ensuring there's representation of trans folks, women, elders, youth, people of color and more. We'll be training them to be effective members on our LGBTQ nonprofit boards.

We could all do a better job of stepping up as allies and accomplices. This is something I spoke about at the National LGBT Chamber of Commerce conference here in August. We have a culture of folks saying inappropriate, hurtful things about other communities that may not be present in the room. Some call it "locker room talk." The only way we can eradicate this kind of bigotry is together.

We need not just straight people who are allies to LGBTQ communities, we need white people who are allies to people of color or able-bodied people who are allies to people who are living with disabilities. We need to speak up as LGBTQ folks and combat problematic language. We need to be able to call out what's inappropriate and prejudiced, check people on language that's hurtful and damaging. That's the only way that we're going to move forward to a space where we're creating more inclusive environments for everyone. ■

Brian McGinnis (bmcginnis@foxrothschild.com) is an associate at Fox Rothschild LLP and a member of the Editorial Board of The Philadelphia Lawyer.