

Podcast: #McGlincheyForward and Leaders at the Front

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Diversity may seem like a buzzword in the legal industry, but recent years have proven the conversation around equity is critical for the future of the law.

In this episode, McGlinchey Managing Member **Michael Ferachi** (Baton Rouge) and Chief Diversity Officer & HR Director **Eliska Plunkett** (New Orleans) discuss what it means for a law firm to walk the walk when it comes to diversity and inclusion in 2021, including the firm's new [#McGlincheyForward](#) initiative and participation in Diversity Lab's "[Mansfield Rule](#)" certification and the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity (LCLD) "[Leaders at the Front](#)" programs.

Eliska Plunkett: Hello, I'm Eliska Plunkett. I'm the HR Director and newly named Chief Diversity Officer of McGlinchey Stafford. Formerly, I was a Member practicing with McGlinchey's Labor and Employment Practice Group. Michael Ferachi is with me. He's McGlinchey's new (as of 2021) Managing Member, and today we're going to talk to you about Michael's #McGlincheyForward Program, as well as some of the efforts the firm has taken in recent months toward fostering a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable environment.

We talk a lot about our commitment to excellence for our clients, but we can't do that without first committing to our employees. COVID really gave us an opportunity this year to make some changes in the way we operate, and we've capitalized on that to really focus on taking care of each other as a McGlinchey family.

So Michael, tell me about the #McGlincheyForward initiative and in particular, how it focuses on diversity?

Michael Ferachi: Thanks, Eliska. As I began to plan for 2021, I wanted an overall, overarching theme that would describe many of the changes I envisioned that the firm would make in 2021. And so #McGlincheyForward has five elements to it that I first started to focus on: change, culture, empowerment, growth, and gratitude. And really as I thought about these five elements, and the actions under each of the elements, this overarching theme came to me of us moving, really driving the firm forward. And that's how #McGlincheyForward came to be. And since we began to use it, I really think it's a very good description of what we've wanted to accomplish. (And it must be, because I noticed that Disney, one of my favorite companies, began to use it with its Disneyland Forward theme.) Now I mentioned that #McGlincheyForward has a number of elements focused on driving us to

shape the kind of firm we want to be. So let me explain a little on the underlying elements of #McGlincheyForward.

So, for instance, change. You know, law firms are not known for changing very quickly and giving up traditions. But we are committed to viewing challenges as opportunities in disguise, and really pivot when it's right, even if it's hard, when that's what we need to do.

Another one of the themes for #McGlincheyForward is empowerment that I mentioned. We expect our people to bring their A-game to work. And it's the firm's obligation to equip them with the tools to do so. So whether that's mentorship, for instance, formal training for our attorneys, career planning, or business development support, our McGlinchey family members know that the firm is invested in their success.

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And another one of those themes that's really kind of pertinent to today's discussion is culture. A large part of the #McGlincheyForward initiative has to do with nurturing and empowering our McGlinchey family.

And you know, Eliska, you asked in your question about the McGlinchey family. I think it's important to describe who is our McGlinchey family. Last year during the pandemic, as we were facing the challenges that COVID-19 brought to us, we really thought of ourselves as a big family. And that is everybody who works here, the attorneys, the staff, and then the family members of those attorneys and staff. And so we began to use the term McGlinchey family instead of "employees" or "team members," because we really felt like we were a family trying to get through this crisis. And with that came the culture part of #McGlincheyForward, because our firm is our home. We're creating an inclusive environment where each of us should feel welcomed, supported, celebrated, and valued.

Now, part of that is our wellness program. We recognize that we can take care of many things in solving our clients' problems. But we need to also take care of ourselves and our mental health. And so one of the parts of #McGlincheyForward that kind of came out of COVID was our Wellness Works program. We offer to all of our McGlinchey family members from top to bottom, side to side, an opportunity for them to access many tools that we have, and kind of a "mental health toolbox" to help make sure that everybody in our family's mental health is being taken care of.

Another part of our #McGlincheyForward initiative was creating the new position of Chief Diversity Officer, which you now hold, in order to hold us accountable to creating that environment where, like I said, everyone feels welcome, supported, celebrated, and valued.

Well, so Eliska, you're in the process of becoming a Certified Diversity Professional. Tell me about your priorities as Chief Diversity Officer.

Eliska Plunkett: I'm really excited about the opportunity, Michael, and I really have two focuses. One is internally, really improving on the strides we've made so far, becoming a more inclusive environment. Part of that will be to seek [Mansfield Certification](#). We're really excited about this opportunity. We're pairing with Diversity Lab and will be part of their September cohort coming up this year. In addition, I would like to focus on

improving economic well-being in the geographic areas where we do business. And a part of that will be looking at our supplier diversity program, and how we can partner with minority-owned, women-owned vendors, and use those resources to have a positive impact on the communities where we are.

I want to talk a bit about equity. I think at the firm, we've done a good job of focusing on diversity and focusing on inclusion. But equity is something different. It's making sure that everyone in the firm has the exact same opportunities to grow and to succeed. And that's where I think we really need to put our focus this year. One of our past successes in diversity and inclusion has been our participation in the [LCLD](#) (Leadership Council for Legal Diversity) Program. We've been members since it was founded in 2009. We've had [fellows](#) every year. We have engaged in the Pathfinders Program.

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So Michael, you recently completed the LCLD [Leaders at the Front](#) Program, making McGlinchey one of the first midsize firms to do so. Tell me what was important to you and what your pledges entail for that program.

Michael Ferachi: Happy to, Eliska. And let me talk a little bit about what LCLD stands for. LCLD, which is the term that we use frequently, we forget what it stands for. And that's the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity, and it's made up of about 350 corporate chief legal officers and then law firm managing partners. They work to build a more open and diverse legal profession. And as you stated, Eliska, McGlinchey was one of the original group of law firms that joined LCLD back in 2009. And like you mentioned, we've had a number of Fellows and Pathfinders who have participated. We're also proud of the fact that we were honored as a Top Performer by LCLD.

As with most things, a commitment to change has to come from the top. And LCLD instituted a program this year called the Leaders at the Front, which I thought was an excellent idea. It involves a personal pledge by the Managing Member, as well as the organizational pledge. So it's a pledge by me, and then a pledge by the firm. And so let me give you some of the highlights of my personal pledge, as well as the firm's commitment.

I pledged that I would use my position to improve fairness in our processes for talent acquisition, professional development, promotion, compensation, and appointment to firm committees. I've pledged to use my voice to advocate for systemic changes to uproot inequity, whenever the opportunity arises in our society and our profession.

I also pledge to engage with our Members in regular and meaningful discussions about the values and importance to the firm of their active support, not just mine, or the firm in general, but you know, those Members themselves – active support for diversity, equity, and inclusion, particularly as it relates to mentorship, support, client teams, and business development teams.

Now, let me turn to the firm commitment. We challenge ourselves, we're committed to challenging ourselves to think bigger about the broad umbrella of inequity, based on race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, and physical, mental, and intellectual disabilities, and really to be intentional in our use of firm language and programming to honor these experiences.

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Another firm commitment is we're going to increase the firm resources devoted to diversity, equity, and inclusion programming, and to efforts that help us recognize and minimize our implicit bias. Implicit bias is a hard thing to recognize because it's implicit. We really need to spend a good bit of time, and with that our firm resources, in helping us overcome implicit bias. And so we're hoping that through our [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion committee](#) (which you co-chair), our [firm leadership](#), and our [office management](#) – we're going to make educational and community-building resources accessible across a variety of platforms and disciplines to encourage our employees, our family members, as I said earlier, to engage in a personally meaningful way with these resources.

Eliska, these are just a few of the things that we've launched in the past couple of months and in the prior years. What are some of the programs that you're developing to help with the inclusive McGlinchey family environment?

Eliska Plunkett: Well, Michael, we started out recently making changes to our parental leave program and giving more paid time off to our lawyers, so they can better balance their personal lives with their work lives. We've increased the benefits available in our medical plan to include domestic partner coverage, and to include infertility benefits, and to include transgender benefits as needed.

We're also working hard to increase our communications and our transparency internally, having our Wellness Works aimed at supporting employees' mental health, rolling out remote work policies. We've also recently incorporated personal pronouns, the ability to add that to your template or your email signature, or your bio on the website. And we're doing a lot more, in addition to communications on processes and procedures, to encourage more camaraderie and to solidify the culture of our firm as a place where everyone feels welcome and included, by way of communications.

COVID really taught us a lot about communications. I think the biggest thing that happened, and Michael, frankly it was your idea, was to get out a daily newsletter, the "Be Well Stay Well" newsletter, that went out every single day – 151 editions. And it then morphed into one of the best communication formats I've ever seen, which is "The Sidebar," which now goes out twice a month. It has all of the process changes and procedures and information that people need to know, as well as bringing our firm together, highlighting employees in different offices, promoting different fun events like the ["Snacket,"](#) where we all get to vote on our favorite snacks. (I was disappointed in potato chips, by the way. I know you're a chocolate guy yourself.) But we're really working hard to bring all of our family members into one cohesive unit, one family. The bottom line is we are working on multiple initiatives to make sure everyone has a place here and everyone feels included.

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So, Michael, we've come a long way this year. It's been a long and challenging year, but it's opened up a lot of exciting opportunities. I know I am very excited to take on this new role of Chief Diversity Officer and see what I

can do to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion and drive those initiatives in the firm. What do you see as the future of McGlinchey?

Michael Ferachi: Eliska, the future's so bright, we gotta wear shades. Thanks, everybody, for listening. We're happy that you joined us and we look forward to giving you more.

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