

A Seat at the Table

By Kathryn Stebner



“Well-behaved women seldom make history.”

— *Laurel Thatcher Ulrich*

Here I am. Your lesbian, socialist, Buddhist, non-meat eating, tree-hugging, pro-choice CAOC President. Your first. Hopefully not your last.

We are living at a time of upheaval, when people in California and across the world are in need of our help to stand up for what is right and call attention to wrongs.

The world today is hurting, sometimes hateful, mentally challenged, confused, divided and scared. We face war, civil and political unrest, climate change, and a dramatic global political climate.

But our world is also kind, hopeful and compassionate. We see examples of this every day in our lives as trial lawyers.

It is how we deal with these dichotomies that makes us human and tells the real story about who we are and what we leave behind, not only as trial lawyers but also as human beings, parents, children, partners, colleagues and friends.

We ask ourselves these important questions: Who are we and what is our purpose? What are our values, and how do we live them? What do we leave the children? How do we move forward into the face of such injustice?

To us, personal is professional. There is no leaving it behind at the end of a long day. We see the best and worst in people; we know that even in the face of adversity, people can rise to the occasion. We see both the vulnerability and the courage of our clients, and of each other, and that feeds and sustains our faith in humanity

and our ability to keep fighting for what is right.

And how do we do it? For starters, family is at the root of all. There are our biological families and our chosen families (a term used by the queer community for years, as many in our chosen families were rejected by their biological families (of note, not mine!)). We at CAOC are chosen family. When family of any kind gets together, there is always a seat at the table for everyone, no matter what. This is the strength of family. We accept each other for who we are, and we stick together no matter what.

We, too, at CAOC must have a seat at the table available for everyone. I want to say, loudly and clearly, that no matter what your economic status, race, age, sex, orientation, spirituality or identity may be, the seat is yours. I am committed to that. If you ever feel like there is no room for you, my door is always open.

We all come to this table with a different lens, and all are needed to make not only organizational change but social change. Our collective strength drives behavior, improves people's lives and allows us to fight with vigor, clarity and focus.

I have had my own personal struggles as an “outsider.” I have been silenced, spit on, called “dyke” and “faggot,” fired from a job, hidden my life and feared for my own safety because of who I am. I have been denied equal rights in popular vote, in courtrooms and in meeting rooms. And although I am now your CAOC President, many of these struggles continue today.

I have also struggled over the years looking the other way, biting my lip and not

saying anything when I see that seat taken away. I've seen women and people of color silenced, excluded and disregarded. I listened to jokes and comments that were cringeworthy, I saw ignorance and indifference. But I am still here because this does not define us.

All we can continue to do is use our moral compasses, make daily decisions that chip away at people's pain and loss of dignity. To lift each other up.

I need your help. Like I said, you at CAOC are my family. And my family has always been there when I needed them. So now, I need you to stand by my side. Help me stare down the ones who would take away people's lives and loves, and stare down the ones who would take away people's seats at the table. Don't allow those with power to get away with their greed unchecked. Don't allow our family to treat any one of us differently than anyone else.

So yes. Here I am. Your lesbian, socialist, Buddhist, non-meat eating, tree-hugging, pro-choice CAOC President. I am strong and brave and hardened. I am also a Pollyanna, sappy and emotional. And with you, my CAOC family by my side, I won't give up. ■

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