

# HEAR OUR VOICES

*In these pieces written by AAJ's LGBTQ+ trial lawyer members, read about their experiences and stories they want to share.*

## Unapologetically Me

By || **ANTHONY MAY**

On my office desk sits a white coffee cup with a graphic. On the left, there's a cartoon of a simple brown horse with the words "Other Lawyers" above it. On the right in large marquee letters the word "ME" appears over a unicorn surrounded by stars, dancing and spinning around. A holiday gift, this unicorn mug seems to capture my experience as a gay lawyer in an oddly fitting way.

I grew up in Ohio, spending my childhood gazing out the back window of my grandparents' station wagon at rural farmlands, home to cows—and, yes, brown horses. Weekend trips beyond the city limits always brought the familiar smell of barnyard animals. We'd visit small, quintessential Mayberry towns for baseball tournaments, family picnics, and county fairs.

My upbringing instilled typical Midwestern values: mind your manners, respect your elders, keep to yourself. These values meant you didn't talk about people's "preferences" or their "special" friends. As a kid who knew early on that my attractions didn't lie with the opposite sex, it became increasingly isolating to bury who I was and hide what I felt.

By the time I applied to law school, I decided that I'd had enough. I wanted to go far away to a magical place where I could shed the brown coat I had been wearing and become who I really was. I moved to the East Coast and found

myself in a new, unfamiliar world—in all the best ways. Here, people looked and acted differently than I did, and they weren't afraid to show it.

Still, it wasn't easy. I remained guarded about who I could truly be myself around. I was a night student, taking classes while working as a paralegal during the day, and I remember a colleague wanting to set me up with a "lovely young lady." I wasn't interested. I knew I was a unicorn, but I didn't know how to fully embrace it.

Over time, people started to notice the unicorn horn peeking from my brow. I found a sense of belonging among those who understood the value of embracing uniqueness—individuals who recognized that accepting and celebrating differences could help others display their own horns in a sea of brown—and inspire others to display their horns proudly. They gave me the confidence to be myself and not shy away from embracing who I was, both personally and professionally.

Last year, I tried my first jury trial. My client, a person with disabilities, had faced discrimination from fellow members of the local school board on which she was elected to serve. She had endured two years of mistreatment and brought the case to highlight how important it is for people who are different to be seen, heard, and represented.

Not only was it my first trial, but I was also first chair. As I prepared, doubts crept in. What if the jury saw who I was and didn't accept me or my differences? What if being true to myself jeopardized my client's case? I felt the familiar urge to hide and retreat into the brown coat I once wore.

But my client's unwavering bravery reminded me how important visibility is—to be unapologetically and uniquely yourself. Advocating for her right—as a person with disabilities—to have representation in local politics meant that I, too, had to represent who I am.

I harnessed my quirky, energetic traits and my flair for the dramatic, turning them into strengths rather than weaknesses. With this resolve, our team got the job done, and the jury sided with my client.

What I'm trying to say is that, in a world full of brown horses, I've finally learned that it's OK to be a unicorn. No matter what happens, no matter how hard some try to silence the music, I hope I dance enough to inspire the next generation of unicorns—whatever shape or form they may take—to spin along with me. 🏳️‍🌈



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## Six Weeks Before the Wedding

By || **SHAUNA R. MADISON**

*Please note that my wife agreed to my sharing our story.*

Six weeks before the wedding, our lives changed forever. It was Labor Day weekend 2018 when my then-fiancée experienced her first—and only—manic episode.

It stemmed from a heated Zoom conversation with her parents about our upcoming nuptials. My partner and I had been together 11 years, yet her parents still refused to accept us, citing their church's view of homosexuality as a sin. Everything her parents said in the video conference snapped the last thread of trust between them and broke her heart.

My partner had always strived to be "the good daughter," but after years of enduring her parents' vitriol and disdain for our "lifestyle," she finally took the path of full resistance. That night, she announced loudly that her parents were unequivocally uninvited to our wedding. Her parents, completely unfazed, were fine with this decision since they never intended to attend. Three days later, my partner was admitted to a psychiatric facility.

Shortly after she arrived at the facility, I busted through the doors and proclaimed, "I'm here to see my wife!" We had already been together for over a decade, and I wasn't about to let her parents be her medical point of contact. In my mind, *Obergefell v. Hodges* had all but proclaimed us married.

Staff escorted me to the padded room where they had placed my partner. She was lying on a thick green mattress in the middle of the floor. The small, dingy room was sparse, with only my wife, her breakfast, and a blanket.

I softly shook her awake and was surprised to see that she recognized me. I noticed she hadn't eaten, so I spoon-fed her applesauce, wrapped my arms around her as she nestled under the blanket, and then watched her quickly fall back to sleep. No more than 60 seconds later, an agitated nurse stormed into the room and told me, "Get up! That's inappropriate."

I shot up quickly, confused about what I had done wrong, but I respected her command. I sat next to my partner, gently stroking her back. I've always wondered if the nurse would have said the same thing to a straight couple.

After spending a week in the facility, my partner was released. She seemed lucid and aware of the manic episode that had landed her in the facility and was happy to go home. But there was still a journey ahead.

In the following days, we met with a slew of therapists and psychologists. As our wedding day neared—only four weeks away—my therapist asked if I was still sure about getting married. Without missing a beat, I responded, "Yes. She is the love of my life. Regardless of whether we get married now or later, it's always

been her . . . it will always be her. She's my future wife."

In the coming weeks, my parents helped us tie up the loose ends of the wedding. My friends brought food to our home and gave me a shoulder to cry on when life felt overwhelming. I attended countless doctor's appointments to titrate my partner off the harsher antipsychotics.

As the wedding date neared, she became more and more like her loving self. And on a beautiful sunny day in October, we said our vows at a stunning golf course in Corona, Calif., "through sickness and in health, till death do us part."

We've been married nearly seven years now, together for nearly 18. After years of therapy and hard conversations, her parents have finally come around. They love us and visit often. In fact, they are visiting this weekend, and we get to tell them we are expecting their first grandchild.

This journey took blood, sweat, tears, and a lot of patience, but we hope it can be an inspiration to LGBTQ+ youth—and to all—that love truly conquers all. 🏳️‍🌈



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