

WORK



Leading by Example

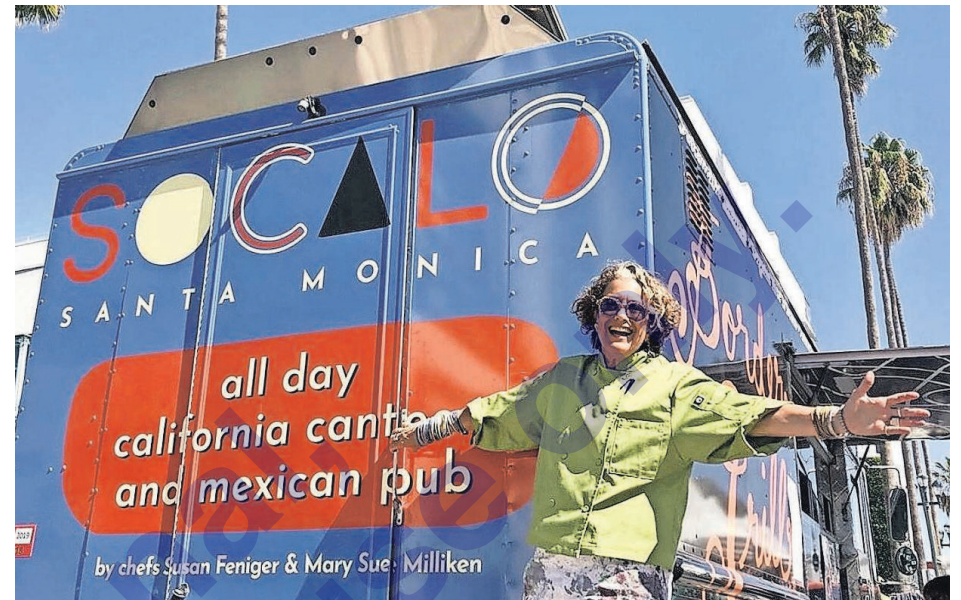
Amid DEI rollbacks, LGBTQ+ leaders are beacons of representation and inclusion

By Matt Alderton

Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) is under assault. Conceived to promote the fair treatment and full participation of all people in business, education and government — particularly those who have been historically underrepresented, such as LGBTQ+ people — it has been the subject of a flurry of executive orders from President Donald Trump.

In fact, a March analysis by The New York Times found that the number of companies in the S&P 500 mentioning DEI in their public financial filings had fallen by nearly 60% from 2024. Among the large corporations that have terminated or scaled back their DEI initiatives so far are Google, McDonald's, Meta, Target and Walmart.

Even as some organizations pump the brakes on DEI, others continue to embody its principles by elevating LGBTQ+ leaders whose visibility underscores the benefits of belonging. Here, six of those leaders discuss their accomplishments, commitments and impact.



SUSAN FENIGER, CO-OWNER, MUNDO HOSPITALITY GROUP

In 1978, the James Beard- and Julia Child-award-winning chef Susan Feniger was one of only two women in the kitchen at the prestigious Chicago restaurant Le Perroquet. The chef there treated her terribly.

“At some point, I realized that part of the reason he treated me that way was that I had recently come out,” says Feniger, a former Food Network host and co-owner of Mundo Hospitality Group, whose esteemed restaurants include the Border Grill in Los Angeles.

In the wake of that experience, Feniger has dedicated her career to building workplaces that are welcoming and inclusive. “Our kitchens and restaurants have always been that way,” she says. “Part of that is because I’m an out lesbian and have been for a long time — for as long as I’ve had my own business. That, to me, sets an example ... and sends a very clear message that we offer a safe environment.”

Feniger has also been a longtime board member of the Los Angeles LGBT Center and in 2019 helped start its Culinary Arts program, which prepares LGBTQ+ youth and seniors for meaningful culinary careers. “The hospitality business is our country’s largest employer, so having policies that are inclusive in our industry can make a huge difference,” she says.



Susan Feniger, a James Beard- and Julia Child-award-winning chef, supports the LGBTQ+ community with good food and equal opportunity.

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY MUNDO HOSPITALITY GROUP

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Brett Smiley, mayor of Providence, Rhode Island, leads the annual Pride parade along with his husband, Jim DeRentis, left, with dog. CITY OF PROVIDENCE

BRETT SMILEY, MAYOR, PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

Brett Smiley never expected to pursue politics. But when he helped a friend run for city council in Chicago, he found a passion for it and began working on political campaigns, serving as chief of staff to former Rhode Island Gov. Gina Raimondo and, ultimately, running for office himself. In 2022, he was elected mayor of Providence, Rhode Island.

"It's been really fulfilling, and I think has made a positive impact on my community," Smiley says of his career.

That community includes LGBTQ+ Rhode

Islanders such as himself. He cites efforts lobbying for marriage equality, simplifying adoptions for same-sex couples, making gender-neutral bathrooms available in public buildings and offering affirming gender markings on state driver's licenses as career highlights.

"I've tried to react to the needs of the community ... in a way that's really moved the needle," Smiley says. "As a result, Rhode Island and Providence are consistently regarded as among the most welcoming and embracing communities in the country."

In even the most progressive places, being

out and proud still makes a positive difference, he says. "As mayor, I get to go first in our local Pride parade. And every year when my husband and I march hand-in-hand through downtown ... we run into a younger person who is just so thrilled to see the mayor of the capital city holding hands with his husband, Jim DeRentis. That statement — that visual show of, 'You can achieve great things and live a safe and supported life here in Providence' — is really powerful."

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AUGUST JENNEWEIN/MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY



PROVIDED BY DAVID DOW

SAM MOORE, DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HISTORY, MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY

As operator of the Missouri History Museum, the Missouri Historical Society is in the business of storytelling. And Sam Moore is its storyteller in chief.

“Our job is to tell the St. Louis story and to tell it as loudly as we can,” says Moore, who is managing director of public history. “That means we get to share stories of all St. Louisans, including queer St. Louisans.”

Being a native of the St. Louis region and a member of the LGBTQ+ community, that mission is personal to Moore. “When you grow up in a community and you go to your community’s history museum, you see the story of a place,” he says. “If you aren’t reflected in that, it impacts you. It makes you feel like you don’t

have a place in that community.”

From that sentiment came the Missouri History Museum’s “Gateway to Pride” exhibit, which is the first full-scale exhibit celebrating St. Louis’ LGBTQ+ history.

“As a gay man in leadership at one of America’s largest, oldest historical societies, I have a particular privilege and responsibility to share these stories and to be in conversation about them with members of the public, donors and policymakers,” Moore says, adding that objections to LGBTQ+ stories won’t do anything to erase them. “There are conversations to be had between people and their pastors, political leaders and school boards, and those are conversations we want to stay in those spaces. When it comes to history, though, that’s our lane. The idea that everyone deserves to have their story told is nonnegotiable.”

BONNIE THURSTON, DIRECTOR OF PLAYER PROGRAMS, WNBA

In her role with the WNBA, Bonnie Thurston manages off-court matters like marketing appearances, education and professional development for pro basketball players. But for LGBTQ+ players, in particular, the most important service she offers is the simple act of being herself.

“I’m married to my amazing, beautiful wife, Michelle, who is a professional dancer; we have two kids and ... we’re very proud members of the LGBTQ+ community,” Thurston says. “I have never shied away from that. And for our players who are LGBTQ+, I think it feels good to ... work closely with someone who shares their lived experience.”

Thurston is cofounder and cochair of NBA Pride, the first LGBTQ+ employee resource team in a professional sports league. Established in 2015, its

mission is supporting LGBTQ+ employees and allies across the NBA and WNBA.

“We’ve helped build a more welcoming culture,” says Thurston, for whom a highlight of NBA Pride is its partnership with Heritage of Pride, the organization that plans and produces New York City’s Pride parade, in which the NBA and WNBA have participated since 2016.

Thurston recalls meeting a man during the first parade who was so moved by seeing their float that he went on to work in pro sports. “He said (it) made him realize ... that sports was a safe space for him as a gay man,” Thurston says. “At a minimum, that’s the message I want to get across to our fans and employees: Our sport welcomes you.”

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PROVIDED BY SAMANTHA GIUSTI

SAMANTHA GIUSTI, CHIEF CUSTOMER OFFICER, IKEA U.S.

Samantha Giusti isn't a typical retail executive. A social worker by trade, she previously was executive director of the Delaware Valley Legacy Fund, a community foundation whose mission is supporting the LGBTQ+ community in the Greater Philadelphia region. When she decided to join corporate America in 2017, she had one condition: She had to work for an enterprise that made her feel good.

That enterprise turned out to be Swedish home furnishings company IKEA, where Giusti is chief customer officer for the global retailer's U.S. business. "What brought a social worker to IKEA was the company's alignment with my own values as a person," says Giusti, who cites inclusion as one of those values. Her job — increasing customer satisfaction

and improving the customer experience — demands it. Giusti says the IKEA vision is based on creating a better everyday life for all people. "We want our business to reflect the diversity of the world we live in because we want to ... ensure that our products, services and company culture reflect the variety of all the communities we serve."

That includes the LGBTQ+ community, of which Giusti is a proud member. "Being an LGBTQ+ person makes me a more empathetic leader because I know ... the value of resilience and the power of authenticity," she says. "When you're both highly effective and fully yourself, it empowers other people to be the same. And when people feel like they can be fully themselves, they take bigger business risks and make better business decisions."



PROVIDED BY AUBREY MASLEN

AUBREY MASLEN, VP AND HEAD OF DE&I COMMUNICATIONS AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS, L'ORÉAL NORTH AMERICA

Encompassing 38 iconic global brands — including Maybelline New York, Garnier, Lancôme and Kiehl's — French personal-care colossus L'Oréal is the world's largest beauty company.

"We have an aspiration to create as many interpretations of beauty as there are people on the planet," says Aubrey Maslen, who leads diversity, equity and inclusion communications and strategic partnerships at L'Oréal North America. A powerful example of Maslen's work is Beauty Marketing in a Diverse World, an inclusive workshop he codeveloped for L'Oréal's marketing talent.

"L'Oréal is the largest beauty advertiser in the world," Maslen says.

"We recognize that the narratives that are created, shaped and perpetuated through media have the ability to impact the way folks perceive themselves as well as others, and we want to be on the right side of those perceptions. So, we're expanding the aperture of beauty as wide as possible so that people who may not historically have felt considered feel considered."

That includes LGBTQ+ people like himself. "I grew up not seeing people who looked like me — who were maybe more effeminate presenting or liked wearing makeup and wanted to proudly embrace that," Maslen says. "L'Oréal recognizes that there are a variety of gender expressions and a variety of ways that people want to show up and demonstrate their beauty. What we're about is creating products and services that allow folks to showcase that."