

ARTICLES

I Don't Wear Dresses

By Marla R. Butler – February 13, 2023

Several years ago, I attended an out-of-town legal industry conference that consisted of programming during the day and a gala in the evening. As the evening drew nearer, I looked at the conference materials to learn of the gala's location, and I noticed for the first time that the materials described the dress code for the gala as "cocktail dresses or gowns for women and suit-and-tie or tuxedos for men." Well, I hadn't packed a cocktail dress or gown. In fact, I haven't worn (or owned) a skirt, dress, or gown since the early 1990s. Suddenly, this gala became a source of deep discomfort for me. The message sent by that dress code was that only those who strictly conform to gender norms should attend. So, I spent that evening watching television in my hotel room instead of networking at that conference. I felt unwelcome in that space even before I stepped into the ballroom.

Is this truly acceptable? Why would anyone believe I needed to wear a dress or gown to positively contribute to the conversations and atmosphere at that gala? My suits are tailor-made and quite conservative. In other words, I dress professionally. Just not in a skirt, dress, or gown.

This issue is one I've faced repeatedly in my career, and I suspect there are many others who can commiserate, especially professionals in the LGBTQ+ community. I bring attention to it in this article because I hope it will serve as a reminder to all that there is so much diversity among us, including diversity in our gender expression. And, if our goal is to be inclusive, we should work to recognize the full range of that diversity.

I also want to remind my fellow gender non-conforming colleagues out there that our value is not defined by the extent to which we meet societal expectations regarding "gender appropriate" attire. Case in point: I was preparing for trial in a small, southern town. A few days before trial began, our local counsel pulled me aside. He is a sincere man whom I deeply respect. He's the type of person whom, if we spent more time together, I would likely call a friend. But, when he pulled me aside a few days before trial, he offered me a piece of well-intended advice that, I believe, ended up being a lesson for both of us. He told me that people were "traditional" in that town, and at trial, I should wear a dress. As I tried to quickly process the flood of emotions that immediately went through me, I looked at him and said, "I'll wear a dress if you wear a dress."

Needless to say, I did not wear a dress at that trial. And we won the case. And that jury gave my client everything I asked of them. After the verdict was read and the court adjourned, a few jurors stayed behind and waited outside the courthouse when we exited. Two of the jurors, one of whom was the foreperson, approached me. The foreperson said, "You were just so good in there. Every time you stood up, we felt like we trusted what you were telling us."

That jury trusted me not because of what I was wearing or not wearing. It didn't matter if I wore a skirt or pants, high heels or loafers. That jury trusted me because when I stood up to talk to them, I was me. Period. I was genuine and just me.

So, you be you.

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