Parade marchers around the country are ankle-deep in glitter. It’s an annual hazard of June, LGBTQ Pride Month, dedicated to commemorating the 1969 Stonewall riots in Manhattan, which were a tipping point for gay liberation in the United States. Yet, even as those celebratory events take place, various pieces of state legislation are spurring civil liberties battles nationwide, including, most recently, in North Carolina.

“It’s a law that discriminates. It’s a very sad moment for North Carolina,” said Karen Popp of House Bill 2, which recently passed in the state and nullified local ordinances that would have expanded protections for the LGBTQ community.

A partner and practice-area leader of Sidley’s White Collar: Government Litigation & Investigations group, Popp says such current events are a reminder of the growing pains inherent in attaining equality in society, including in the workplace. She was therefore gratified to be able to say when we spoke on the eve of this year’s Pride month, “I came to this firm being out and it’s never been an issue.”

Popp recalls walking the halls of Sidley shortly after starting work in 1999 and experiencing a very open and accepting environment, even as diversity efforts in certain areas of corporate America were as yet fledgling. “From the day I got here, the firm embraced me and put me in positions of leadership,” she said. This includes serving on the firm’s Executive Committee and being a practice team leader.

You might say, “Sure, that sounds great on paper,” but Popp is also real-life proof—she met her wife, Mary Coleman Ragsdale, at the firm, who was also a lawyer there. The couple married, and when her wife gave birth to their twin boys, they received gifts and well wishes from secretaries, other staff and lawyers firmwide. Indeed, some even joked as to why the boys were not named “Sidley and Austin.”

Popp has had a long and successful career at Sidley, representing her clients in complex commercial litigation, corporate criminal defense, internal investigations, SEC enforcement and congressional investigations. That work is informed, in part, by her prior government and private sector experience. She has served as a federal prosecutor in New York, a lawyer in the Office of Legal Counsel at the U.S. Department of Justice, and, just before joining Sidley, as associate White House counsel to then-President Bill Clinton.

In thinking about the various spheres in which she’s worked, as well as the cultures of other law firms around the country, Popp isolates Sidley’s management and infrastructure as what makes the firm so successful in fostering a welcoming environment for LGBTQ employees. She points to the firm’s formal appointment of Sally Olson as Chief Diversity Officer, as well as the long and devoted tenures of the firm’s Diversity Committee and Committee on Retention and Promotion of Women, as proof of Sidley’s commitment to diversity and inclusion.

“This is exactly the type of place you want to go to be a lawyer and to thrive,”

Despite her personal lack of hardship in being an out lawyer, Popp acknowledges there are still people in the world who hold negative views of gays and lesbians. This is all the more reason, she says, to make diversity and inclusion an imperative. “A lot of bigotry and discrimination come from a lack of exposure to people who are different from you,” she said. “As soon as someone who has a negative view is around a gay person—perhaps who is their neighbor, their child or their friend at church—it normalizes it. It makes them realize about things like same-sex marriage, ‘Hey, what’s the big deal, anyway?’”

Karen Popp
Sidley Executive Committee
Member and Co-Leader of the White Collar Practice

Find out more about how we are fostering inclusiveness in our law firm’s culture at sidley.com/