



Thank you to the New Jersey Chapter of the Society of Women Environmental Professionals (NJSWEP) for recognizing Pride Month and for inviting me to share some thoughts as your round table discusses LGBTQ+ experiences in the environmental industry.

The title of your event says it all: everyone *is* awesome. But to see and experience all that *awesome*, we must build understanding and create space for our differences to be recognized and celebrated.

For LGBTQ+ people to be seen and accepted for who we are allows us to bring our full selves into our workplaces, our communities, our political organizations, and our institutions of government.

I am aware that there has been some commentary about my appointment as the first out LGBTQ+ environmental commissioner in the country or the first openly gay man to join a Governor's Cabinet here in New Jersey.

While I would never undervalue the importance of representation and visibility, I can tell you this: I do not think my LGBTQ+ identity makes me special. And it is certainly not a qualification. But what I think *is* important about it—what is somewhat new—is that my identity is not a *disqualification*.

That bit of progress is only possible because of the risk-takers and the trailblazers who came before us and upon whose shoulders we stand; those whose hard work helped to make a scared kid like me feel safe enough to own his truth *and* pursue a passion for public service.

I will never forget the relief of coming out that others helped make possible for me.

I also recognize that the coming out never really ends. For many LGBTQ+ people, every new door—whether we are stepping into a job interview, a meeting room, or the board room—can feel like that closet door. We cannot always be sure that we will find welcome and inclusion on the other side. For that reason, I have come to believe that if you have privilege of coming out, it is indeed a radical act. Because the act of coming and living out helps to destroy the silence in which fear and ignorance take root.

That is why visibility is so important and why Pride itself is so necessary.

So that one day, coming out feels less like a watershed moment that could risk your relationships, your livelihood, or even your life.

So that one day, the often-nontraditional family structures of LGBTQ+ people will not seem so different after all.

We only get to that day by supporting one another: by standing up, being visible and being present for people in diverse communities, whether or not we share the exact same circumstances that make us diverse. Because the LGBTQ+ community is really every community. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, non-binary, and questioning people come from every walk of life, every ethnic and racial group, every religion, everywhere.

We get there by teaching our kids to show kindness to people who are different from them.

We get there through persistence and perseverance, and by building understanding across our larger communities, our state, and our country. That includes the understanding you will build here, today.

Thank you for your visibility, for hosting this round table, and for sowing LGBTQ+ pride.