

## A Passion for Diversity

By Simma Lieberman

Some people work at their jobs because they have to make a living, and they get to express themselves after work. Some people have careers that they love, and have a hard time not taking home their work with them when they go home. And then there are successful people in the diversity field. They have a passion for diversity and they live their work. Whether or not they take their work home with them, their work is always driven by the values they live every day, and their lives are driven by the values they promote at work.



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When organizations began to embrace diversity in the 1980s, many of them thought that diversity training was the answer. They thought that if every employee attended a diversity training class, biases, complaints and lawsuits would disappear and everyone would work together in harmony forever. There were two kinds of people engaged in diversity training, education and organizational development. There were those who thought of it as program or a trend. These people read a few books, took a train-the-trainer class or bought one in the mail and called themselves experts. The second group knew that it was a process, not a one day program and that in order to create change they needed to live it, learn it and continually develop their passion for it. They were cognizant of the need to integrate diversity into the business strategy of any organization and the rest of their lives. They also knew there were no quick fixes—that it took patience, and time—but change was possible.

The first group lost interest and went on to something else but people in the second group are still here helping to create change. They're working to create inclusive environments where all people can do their best work and have their individual skills and talents, recognized, appreciated and utilized.

I wanted to know more about this passion for diversity and where it came from. What drives some individuals to maintain their personal mission, vision and values despite resistance, challenges and nay sayers. I interviewed four people whose passion for diversity is so great it's like a magnetic force that continues to get stronger and attract everything in its path. These four people are Terry Howard, Director of Diversity for Texas Instruments; Michele Atlas from *Workforce Diversity Network*; Deb Dagit, Executive Diversity Director at Merck; and, Edgar Quiroz, Director of Strategic Initiatives and Innovation at Kaiser Permanente.

I asked all of them, *Why did you get involved in diversity?* Here are their stories:

**Terry Howard**, Director of Diversity at Texas Instruments, has a long-standing and personal connection with diversity. "As an African-American male, I've been involved in and experienced diversity my entire life. From a career standpoint, I actually got involved in this work by 'default.' During the mid 1980s, I managed a group charged with delivering employment and EEO service for AT&T. Our client base was very diverse and that itself heightened my interest in this work. The challenge of fostering awareness of that growing diversity and leveraging it was most intriguing to me. In 1986, I read the Hudson Institute report *Workforce 2000*. This ignited me and I knew I wanted to help break new ground."

Terry's passion and his involvement in diversity continue to grow. He now supports 15 diversity affinity groups at Texas Instruments, as well as the many business level diversity committees and their annual diversity conferences. "In between, I write a monthly internal diversity column and issue periodic diversity tips on the full range of diversity topics, and I speak on diversity and inclusion at meetings and retreats internally and externally ." Recently he founded the Diversity Connection Symposium for Texas Diversity Professionals, a group consisting of representatives from Shell Oil, Price Waterhouse, First American, Intel, Intuit, JC Penny, Delotte and others and delivered talks in France and China. He takes his passion for diversity and inclusion to the community, having participated in a community march against hate. "One of the things I'm most proud of is my role in the successful integration of religion and faith in the workplace amid lots of skepticism." He said that people were still talking about the standing room only session "When Traditional Religion Meets Sexual Orientation". When asked what drives him his reply was, "My passion is driven by my curiosity about the far-reaching implications of diversity and getting organizations to see that connection. It never stops."

**Deb Dagit**, Executive Director of Diversity for Merck, told me that she had lived months at a time from when she was 11 to 16 in the Shriners Hospital to receive treatment for a bone condition that resulted in fractures and bone deformities. She was there with other children who had bone and burn disabilities from all over the world. "I became close to kids from all over the world who were also living in the hospital for months at a time, cut off from families and "normal" life . I learned what we had in common was more significant than what was different, regardless of our cultural differences."

During the time she spent in public school she was separated from the rest of her class as schools were not required to integrate children with disabilities and therefore there were many restrictions on how she was allowed to attend . She had to sit right next to the teacher's desk and was not allowed to go to recess or lunch with the other kids. In describing her experiences she says, "Because of how I was treated, I related to other kids who were also seen as needing extra attention from the teacher, whether for behavioral issues or learning challenges. Issues of fairness, respect and inclusion became very important to me as I observed who was singled out and how this caused them to be treated by other members of the class." After graduation, Dagit tutored people who immigrated from Vietnam after the war. She saw how they struggled to learn the language, culture, and to fit in with other kids.

She explained that there is a disproportionate number of people with disabilities who

are veterans and who are from minority backgrounds for a variety of reasons , and that along with diversity issues amongst people with disabilities who come from different backgrounds, there are diversity issues around different types of disabilities. “Some disabilities are more stigmatized than others,” she noted.

Her experiences inspired her to become a diversity leader. She traveled to Washington DC and spoke to lawmakers about the importance of passing the ADA and fought against weakening amendments . “During that time I thought about struggles and victories like *Brown vs. the Board of Education* and the Voting Rights Act, and the importance of civil rights for all people. This experience also caused her to realize the importance of 'reasonable accommodation' for all employees as a foundation for what are now called 'work environment' initiatives."

“In my first corporate job out of college I was told very matter of factly that I would never get beyond an 8 or 9 dollar and hour entry level job. After about 5-6 years I began to realize that they were serious about this low ceiling, so I left the corporate world for four years and I worked in the non-profit sector primarily on disability issues. As comfortable and engaging as it was to be with my "tribe," I knew that to effect real systemic changes more broadly. it needed to be from the inside out, companies need to see diversity and inclusion as important to the success of their business and consistent with the workplace ethics and corporate social responsibility values the espouse. When I re-entered the private sector it was as an executive with senior level responsibility and salary.

Deb says her passion for diversity only continues to grow. She was a founding member of the Conference Board Workforce Council on Diversity 13 years ago . “I have never been around anything else that keeps me stimulated 24 hours a day. I rarely read anything that is not in the field. I have a global vision and I want to help create the kind of world that does not just tolerate differences, but one where people are truly respectful and inclusive of others, the kind of world that is healthy for our children.”

**Edgar Quiroz** is the Director of Workforce Diversity at Kaiser Permanente's National Diversity Department. He told me, “I really never sought to get involved with diversity work, diversity work got involved with me.” He grew up in San Francisco in a diverse neighborhood with African-Americans, Asians, Caucasians and Latinos like himself. While attending high school in the 1970s he was active in community student leadership. “I organized youth in under served communities city wide to help them with jobs, careers, and educational enhancement. Not one of my past job descriptions ever included diversity as a duty, but I always managed to weave diversity work into my functions. As a boy, my father and I walked the picket lines with Cesar Chavez in support of the UFW.” He began working at SF General Hospital as a youth outreach worker. “I worked with young people who were homeless, drug and alcohol addicted, prostitutes, battered and abused.

Today Edgar says he is privileged to be the Director of Workforce Diversity for Kaiser Permanente where he has worked for 20 years. During this time he was a founding board member and past president of the Kaiser Permanente Latino Association. “I chose Kaiser Permanente because their social mission on community wellness, diversity and cultural competency are aligned with my own. My primary three areas of involvement are: 1) Enhance the diversity, cultural competence, skill and performance of our workforce; 2) Provide culturally competent medical care and culturally appropriate

service to improve the health and satisfaction of our increasing diversity membership;  
3) Grow our membership through effective market segmentation approaches that target specific populations which are the fastest growing segments of our society".

Diversity impacts his personal life every day. His family is bi-racial, and it is important to him that they all know, embrace and celebrate both his Latino culture and the African-American culture. "My passion for diversity has increased to a point that far exceeded any of my expectations. It's only gotten better and I maintain my lifetime relationships with mentors and colleagues. I love my work, and there is a lot more work to do. As a country we have to pay more attention to populations that have been ignored so more people have access to quality health care. I remain optimistic and hopeful. I am inspired by all others who are also working for change."

**Michelle Atlas** began her career in Vocational Rehabilitation in Rochester, New York over thirteen years ago. Seven years ago, she was hired by the Rochester Business Alliance to create a new program to provide employment services to people with disabilities. After the first year, she was asked to represent the Rochester Business Alliance at the Workforce Diversity Network, an organization whose mission is to create a nationwide learning network to support organizations in learning more about the benefits of diversity in the workplace, and is expanding to other areas in the USA "I didn't know a lot about other areas of diversity beyond disability, but as I began to learn about all the other dimensions, diversity and inclusion became so important to me and I kept learning and expanding my knowledge base about every component." As a representative, Michelle got to meet diversity leadership in various kinds of organizations. She learned more about diversity initiatives and issues that organizations were dealing with. "I felt a very strong affinity for this work. I went from being a representative to the Workforce Diversity Network to serving on the board and becoming a part time staff member; working with the Executive Director, and coordinating membership and organizing our national conference. I love the spirit of the other people who do this kind of work. My passion comes from being a part of something that is so good for the world at so many levels. I'm excited by other cultures, and I am part of an incredible program called the Mosaic Partnerships where leaders in our region are partnered with someone from a different race and participate in group coaching sessions."

Michelle talked about how crucial it is for people in the health care field to be culturally competent. Besides her part time work with WDN, she consults, coaches and trains people who employ people with disabilities to be more culturally competent. "My learning points have been to honestly assess my own biases and to then be able to help other people assess their own and feel safe. Learning about my own biases has been very liberating and other people I work with have said that it is true for them. If we want to move forward from diversity to inclusion we have to identify our subtle biases and work through them. I hope I never stop learning."

Although these four individuals are from different industries and came to diversity work from different experiences and backgrounds, they share certain qualities and experiences that contribute to their passion for diversity. From Deb's voracious reading of diversity books to Michelle's personal involvement with the Mosaic Partnerships, we see that these four remarkable individuals have all cultivated lifestyles that support their passion for diversity. They live and breathe diversity—both coming from diverse backgrounds and seeking out diverse interactions and experiences. They have all

adopted learning orientations so they can continue to develop their own cultural competence and help others to do the same. Moreover, as we saw with Edgar's work with underserved communities and Terry's work with "Traditional Religion Meets Sexual Orientation" in the workplace, the passion of these four diversity leaders is driven by a lot of 'Cs': courage, concern, and commitment to diversity initiatives. Be it Terry's commitment to helping organizations understand the implications of diversity, Deb's global goals for a better world, Edgar's views on what this country needs to better meet the health needs of its diverse population, or Michelle's emphasis on breaking down barriers through helping people safely address their own biases, this is truly a visionary group of professionals. Most importantly, their visions are long-term, powerful, and important ones that they consistently move forward a day at a time. These are the kinds of diversity leaders that we need working in organizations of all kinds.

For an organization to successfully leverage the diversity of its organization to improve its performance three concurrent imperatives must be in place. First, diversity must be part of your overall business strategy and, secondly, your organization must move from representation and numbers to inclusion at every level. Finally, you will only be successful if you bring in diversity leaders who not only have knowledge of but a passion for diversity.

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