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From the Houston Business Journal:

<https://www.bizjournals.com/houston/news/2021/03/25/diversity-champions-breaux-brook-chen-evans.html>

Meet 4 of HBJ's 2021 Diversity Champions: Pamela Breaux, Sara Brook, Alison Chen, Shannon Evans

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Watch the video below to see a replay of the HBJ's Diversity in Business Awards event broadcast from March 25.



RYAN ANDERSON/HBJ



Diversity in Business Awards 2021

from **Houston Business Journal**

1:07:25



Meet HBJ's Outstanding Diversity Champions, which recognizes individuals within the community or for-profit and nonprofit organizations who have shown outstanding initiative to promote diversity and inclusion either in the organization or community, making a positive difference in others' lives through contributions to social justice, equality and diversity.

Click through the slideshow above to see all of HBJ's 2021 Diversity in Business Awards honorees.

Pamela Breaux

Assistant principal, Klein Forest High School (Klein ISD)

Why is diversity important and how does it impact your clients or business? I believe what is most important about diversity is first having a common understanding of what diversity truly is. Diversity is the presence of different backgrounds and identities and involves the practice of including people from a range of ethnic backgrounds, social constructs, genders, identities, etc. Part of the challenge with diversity is overcoming the assumption that if diversity is present, then inherently, inclusion and belonging exist. In the words of Dereca Blackmon: "Diversity is a fact, inclusion is a strategy, belonging is a measure, and equity is the goal." Diversity is the presence of variety of differing thoughts, backgrounds, identities and approaches. It does not depict the quality of experiences of the people in the different groups. It does not capture the degree to which the people feel welcomed, heard, acknowledged, celebrated or even valued. In terms of impact, I believe it is hugely important to distinguish between what diversity is and is not. When we commit to this part of the work, then can we be intentional with our strategy (inclusion), targeted with our measure (belonging), and successful with achieving our ultimate goal (equity) of impacting the people in our school and district.

What advice would you give to boost diversity in your organization? The opportunities to boost diversity are endless, but my advice would be to continually examine practices around recruiting, hiring, and retaining a diverse staff. Considering incremental yet impactful changes should prove to yield increased diversity. For example, marketing is hugely important because we must take into account the needs of diverse candidates and their behavioral patterns when engaging with employment

opportunities. Genuine and personal messaging that speaks to our commitment to supporting diverse community members will attract more diverse members. Creating an intake process that celebrates cultural strengths, emphasizes inclusion and makes connections will help attract and retain a diverse staff as well. My personal experience has been such that teachers, particularly people of color, desire to know that they can bring their fullest selves to the work environment, and that begins with a commitment to the community. Establishing multiple touchpoints with underrepresented applicants can also lead to a greater sense of connection and value for employees. Connecting with them in personable ways communicates our values and priorities. Also, providing affinity workgroups that individuals can relate to, such as mentorship programs for underrepresented staff and race or gender-specific professional development opportunities, will support diversity efforts and lead to a greater sense of connection and value for new employees.

How do you truly incorporate diversity into your organization? I

work in a school setting with educators from diverse backgrounds and identities; people who have different interests but are often seen collectively sharing ideas and perspectives with one another. We are intentional with our efforts to acknowledge the diversity amongst us and celebrate the diversity by seeking to have every voice heard, particularly on decisions that impact the whole community. The diversity of the group better positions each of us to support every student in our care.

We are committed to incremental positive change resulting from the careful examination of our old habits and practices that may have excluded, subjugated, or disproportionately impacted others in the past. We refer to this as thoughtfully disrupting the status quo.

Sara Brook

CEO and founder, Dessert Gallery Bakery & Café

Why is diversity important and how does it impact your clients or business? Diversity is important because people have been made to feel ashamed and belittled for their differences for so many years. Whether it was their ethnicity, sexuality or religion, those who did not fit a specific mold of what was deemed “acceptable”

were forced to assimilate or face further ostracization. In our current time, it is crucial that we take active steps to right these wrongs and this is what makes diversity such an important, pressing issue. Diversity is about justice and ensuring that certain human beings do not have unfair advantages over others due to centuries of existing power structures. At Dessert Gallery, diversity is celebrated and we aim to make all of our customers and employees feel seen and at home when they dine with us. Our customers can come in and know that they will be welcomed with open arms into the Dessert Gallery family. Our menu consistently includes special treats made for various cultural holiday celebrations as a true testament to our commitment to diversity. Our Pride treats and Black History Month cookies are just a few examples of campaigns that celebrate diversity and positively impact our customers, who now know that the holidays and traditions near and dear to their hearts are near and dear to ours as well.

What advice would you give to boost diversity in your

organization? One of the most important things leaders can do to boost diversity is to keep an open mind during the recruitment process. As business owners or company leaders, it can be easy to maintain a limited view of what a successful, high-achieving employee can look or think. Even more so, we subconsciously stick to an archetype that matches ourselves. Challenging ourselves to expand is a great way to boost diversity. In my experience, I did not seek out diverse candidates to check different groups off of a checklist, but truly sought out the best person for each job and ended up with a diverse group of individuals on my team. Each person contributes uniquely in ways that do not mimic but complement one another. I know Dessert Gallery wouldn't be where it is today if I built a team full of carbon copies of myself. Instead, my diverse team members bring in new perspectives and ideas based on their personal life experiences and our business thrives as a result.

How do you truly incorporate diversity into your organization?

One of the ways I incorporate diversity at Dessert Gallery is through my executive team. My team comprises all women of color and their contributions to the business can't be quantified. As mentioned before, my strategy wasn't to seek out only women of color but to seek out those who would be the greatest fit for each role. When incorporating diversity into an organization, it's

important to ensure that the inclusion doesn't remain superficial and shallow. Having WOC on my leadership team has shown me the importance of amplifying the voices from marginalized groups rather than trying to speak for them. Everyone on my executive team has a wealth of business and life experiences that work in tandem to make Dessert Gallery a welcoming space and profitable business.

Another way diversity is incorporated into Dessert Gallery is through our inclusive campaigns. We provide desserts for a wide variety of holidays such as Black History Month, Ramadan and Hanukkah. Often, celebratory treats are limited to holidays such as Christmas or Easter.

Alison Chen

Partner, Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP

Why is diversity important and how does it impact your clients or business? Diversity, inclusion and belonging are not just choices; they are a moral imperative. Law firms, especially top law firms such as Akin Gump, have both the ability and opportunity to affect real social change and must do so. If not fully committed, we will lose the battle for talent and client loyalty and squander our opportunity to bring about social change that is long overdue in the legal community specifically and our society in general. My Akin Gump colleagues and I consistently hear from clients that diversity is critical. Many of the clients with whom I work closely find a diverse legal team to be more relatable — and more importantly, they find that a diverse team provides them with different perspectives that yield innovative solutions to their challenges. Those clients, their shareholders and other key stakeholders strongly believe that diversity is not just a tick-the-box matter but an area where they expect and actually insist their lawyers take concrete measures and action. Strategic partnerships with clients and external organizations keep us focused on breaking the barriers that persist within the legal industry and incorporating the innovations that advance diversity, inclusion and social justice.

Engaging with clients involves a wide range of activities, which includes regular discussions about staffing their matters, working together to advance our mutual diversity and inclusion goals,

partnering on mentoring and pipeline programs, secondments, and showcasing our diverse lawyers in continuing legal education sessions.

Our partnerships with various diversity-related organizations provide access to cutting-edge research and innovations, as well as critical professional development and networking opportunities that can lead to career-long relationships. These relationships are vital to ensuring we, as leaders, are staying informed and developing our skill-sets to best support a diverse talent pool, both within the firm and the business community at large.

What advice would you give to boost diversity in your organization? Diversity has long been an essential part of our firm's identity. We must see our individual differences as an asset that enhances the quality of life for each of us and strengthens what we can accomplish as a firm. That is why, to boost diversity, firm leadership must be fully committed.

Efforts have to come from the top. Accordingly, the position of chief diversity and inclusion officer has been in place at the firm since 2017, and in 2019, Nimesh Patel was hired to serve in that role. Together, our chairperson Kim Koopersmith and Nimesh ensure that diversity and inclusion align with the firm's strategy, commitment to excellent client service, and key aspects of attorney recruiting, development, and promotion. Their efforts include:

- Ensuring diversity in the firm's most important committees.
- Practice and office leadership positions.
- Partnering with clients.

One significant example of their efforts: last year, we restructured our firmwide diversity and inclusion council to incorporate attorneys in senior leadership positions from across the firm, including members of the management committee, practice group leaders and office partners in charge.

Shannon Evans

Division executive chair, and DEI and division director, delivery system reform incentive payment program, HCA Houston Healthcare

Why is diversity important and how does it impact your clients or business? We consider it our privilege to serve a diverse patient population and employ a diverse workforce of 15,000 colleagues. We realize the importance of our diversity efforts and have aligned our diversity initiatives with our organizational goals. As the leading health care provider in the Greater Houston area, HCA Houston Healthcare affiliated clinicians and support colleagues treat almost a million patients every year and provide over \$2 billion in charity care annually. Our comprehensive network includes 13 hospitals, 10 outpatient surgery centers, 11 free-standing emergency centers and a dozen free-standing diagnostic imaging facilities. We are Houston-based, the fourth-largest city in the U.S., which has been recognized as the most diverse metropolitan area in the U.S. for its racial and ethnic makeup. Above all else, we are committed to the care and improvement of human life.

It is critical that we understand the different dimensions of our patients' and communities' diversity and develop the cultural competency to address factors that are directly in our control and influence those that are not. When we have diverse boards, leaders, colleagues, clinicians, partners, and we cultivate an inclusive environment. We receive the benefit of having those various perspectives, experiences and voices to inform our decision-making and care interventions for the betterment of our patients, colleagues, and communities that we serve. When we look at the workforce, particularly in health care, we face significant shortages as soon as 2025 for every role, from home health aides and nursing assistants to nurse practitioners and physicians, spanning the continuum of care. As we seek to fill those shortages, it has become increasingly important to recruit health care workers across the country and the globe, all of whom bring their culture, language and experience.

Additionally, it is necessary that as an industry and certainly as a provider, we strategize on ways to develop and expand our pipeline by developing the pipeline and leveraging underrepresented groups to support community and economic growth, while also addressing the growing health care workforce needs of the country.

What advice would you give to boost diversity in your organization? Leadership commitment and engagement is the most important factor in boosting diversity, equity and inclusion

within your organization. Your leadership teams can drive your efforts and set the tone and expectations for the organization. In modeling their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion and being vocal supporters, they encourage others to do the same. Be inclusive. It's important to engage as many people as possible. Different individuals will have different perspectives on the challenges and opportunities that are available based on their experiences, backgrounds, culture, gender, level, function tenure, location, etc., within the organization. Have conversations, provide multiple vehicles and forums to share feedback in a safe space, including anonymously.

Identify formal and informal champions and provide resources and education to enhance their competency and proficiency in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). Leverage the innate enthusiasm and commitment to DEI that those champions have and equip them with the tool, knowledge, access, and resources to be successful. DEI is a discipline where the information, norms, challenges and opportunities continue to evolve, so fostering an environment of continuing education and growth is important as you identify the best ways to move forward. It's critical to take a strategic approach to your efforts.

These profiles have been edited for length and clarity.

Sara Samora

Reporter

Houston Business Journal



