



## Creating a workplace of acceptance

*Photo caption: Licelle Vicencio, left, and Jesse Lueck understand how painful it can be to try to conform—and why it doesn't work.*

When you're a Filipino lesbian going through adolescence in the Midwest, the word *isolated* takes on a new meaning.

"I struggled with my identity and sexuality, and dealt with bullying," recalls Licelle Vicencio, sales support specialist for Prudential Advisors in Overland Park, Kansas. "I just wanted to assimilate."

Growing up near Kansas City, Missouri, she stopped bringing her mom's Filipino cuisine to school for lunch because she couldn't take the rude comments about the smell. Confused about her sexuality, she'd refuse to make eye contact in the locker room, to avoid being questioned. And once she realized she liked girls, she stayed away from the few students who were out, so people wouldn't think she was, too.

The turning point was attending the University of Missouri-Kansas City and joining the Queer Alliance to find a place of belonging. She eventually came out to her parents while in college.

"It didn't go well, but thankfully they've come around over the years," Vicencio explains.

Once she joined the workforce, she found companies that value the fact that she's different. But at times, she also found herself on the receiving end of comments that were startling, if not downright offensive. A boss at a prior job told her she was "untouchable" because she's a woman, she's a lesbian and she's Asian.

"At the time, I brushed it off because I just didn't want to deal with it," Vicencio says. "But people don't realize the amount of work it takes to fit in. I feel like I have something to prove. I've felt pressure to be the best at everything."

When she started at Prudential 18 months ago, she was initially nervous about being her authentic self—as do many employees from diverse backgrounds. "I wear ties to work, and at first I worried about that," she says. "Then I thought, 'You know what? I'm going to do this.' And it wasn't a big deal."

Now she's more likely to speak up when a colleague shares a sentiment she disagrees with: "I feel a strong responsibility to facilitate productive conversations."

How does Vicencio respond to comments like, "I don't see color" and "I don't care if you're gay"? "I appreciate the sentiment, but I *want* you to recognize that I'm a gay person of color," she says. "By dismissing that, you're invalidating significant parts of who I am."

She's been met with gratitude and a willingness to learn. A few months back, the subject of inclusion and diversity came up after a team meeting. A colleague suggested having a presentation to address the questions people had, such as how to attract and retain diverse talent and how to address pronouns.

"It's awesome to see people want to understand a diverse workforce and learn how to help those who don't feel they fit in," Vicencio says. Being part of both the PRIDE and Asian Pacific-Islander

Americans business resource groups (BRG) has been “a nice surprise,” too, she adds. “These communities are active and genuinely care about our well-being and growth.”

Jesse Lueck also spent years trying to conform.

Lueck, a project management specialist for PGIM, who prefers to be described as gender fluid, sums up teen years this way: “You can imagine how exhausting it is to be essentially another person all day long, so that everybody else will be OK with me.” Lueck is relieved to have an accepting culture at Prudential but, from an earlier job, knows firsthand what workplace discrimination looks like.

Lueck’s story is the latest in the BRG Real Talks series. Created by Prudential’s business resource groups, the videos feature employees sharing their perspectives on inclusion and diversity. You can watch Lueck's candid story below, or you can read the [transcript](#).

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