Meet Peter Perkowski

The bisexual attorney is helping transgender service members with civil rights lawsuit counterstrikes.

October 1, 2019 By Vic Gerami

If being white, male, cisgender and of the professional class are temptations for people like civil rights attorney Peter Perkowski (he/him) to luxuriate in the comforts of acceptance and privilege in 21st century America, count the native of rural, western New York untempted.

“I didn’t come out until going to college,” Perkowski, who is bisexual, says. “I saw inequality and injustice everywhere, and it was my goal to change that.”

The politics of geography is a theme that helped shape Perkowski’s early view of both how LGBTQ+ are impacted by bigotry, intolerance and hate – as well as how he might be most effective in making change.

“I was aware, even back in 1988, that LGBTQ+ people were not equal,” he says. “I was in school in Western New York, Rochester, which is fairly conservative, though liberal in comparison to its surroundings. It bothered me that LGBTQ+ people were ‘othered’ and discriminated against.”

Though in his mind late to come out, Perkowski soon transformed into a student activist. He eventually took the top leadership post at his college’s LGBTQ student group. Organizing seminal speaker events ignited a fire in his belly that even today fuels his work fighting injustice based on against gender identity, sexual orientation, HIV status, and other marginalized communities.

“Our LGBTQ+ group at college brought many high-profile LGBTQ+ leaders to campus,” Perkowski recalls. “Urvashi Vaid, then the leader of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force; Joe Steffan, a midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy who was expelled six weeks before graduation for refusing to lie about being gay—each of these speakers awed and inspired me.”

By 1992 Perkowski was a volunteer working to help end 12 years of Republican governance from the White House. He even met then Gov. Bill Clinton, that election year’s Democratic nominee, when he came to visit Rochester. Clinton’s election broke the 12-year pall that hung over LGBTQ+ progress, sidelining queer rights and HIV/AIDS research and services work at the federal level. It seemed a new day had dawned in Washington.

“But then ‘Don’t Ask-Don’t Tell’ passed,” Perkowski recalls.

He laments the backward-facing, cruel measure passed by a conservative legislature and signed by the president he'd worked to help elect. Eventually, Perkowski moved to Washington, DC, to be where the action was. He believed he needed a meaningful geographical center from which to engage his activism and to launch his future career as a civil rights attorney.

"I went to law school in DC because it was the seat of the federal government, and I wanted to be where laws could be changed," he says.

"But things got worse. In 1996, I sat in the gallery of the U.S. House of Representatives as the Defense of Marriage Act [DOMA] was debated. Almost all of the comments [from the House Floor] were demeaning and offensive. They were personal attacks against me and all LGBTQ+ people."

Perkowski was at once devastated but also resolved by the legislative hate-fest into which the DOMA debate devolved.

"I was completely demoralized, but I vowed to continue fighting," he says remembering the ferocity of emotions he felt as a young law student sitting in the congressional gallery during those dark days of the mid-1990s.

Nowadays, Perkowski looks for and relentlessly engages the toughest legal battles where basic equality and justice must be won in his fight for America's most vulnerable LGBTQ+ people, lest the essentialist promises of the U.S. Constitution, already struggling to survive in the Trump Era, be relinquished entirely.

Currently, he is Legal & Policy Director of the Modern Military Association of America (MMAA), the nation's largest non-profit organization for the LGBTQ+ and HIV-positive military and veteran community, a post he's held for almost four years.

"I come from a military family," says Perkowski. "In a sense, the job allows me to serve the military community in a way I wasn't allowed to before, and to fight for equal treatment at the same time."

Perkowski sees Trump's actions barring some Americans from serving our nation in the military as a clear betrayal of brave service members who happen to be transgender.

"People do not realize that the fight for equal service did not end with the repeal of 'Don't Ask-Don't Tell,'" he says. "The military community that we at MMMA serve is still in crisis."

Along with partners, Lambda Legal and the law firm Winston & Strawn LLP, the Modern Military Association of America (formerly OutServe-SLDN and American Military Partners Association) is facing off against the Trump Administration in four federal court actions: one challenging the constitutionality of Trump's ban on military service by transgender people, and three seeking to change policies that negatively impact service members living with HIV. "The [MMAA] job gave me the privilege of being able to file four lawsuits on behalf of transgender and HIV+ patriots who want nothing more than do their jobs and protect the country."

Perkowski feels a personal connection to his work.

“In 1998, I was diagnosed with HIV,” he says. “I had just graduated from law school, was about to move from D.C. back to Los Angeles, and was taking the California bar three weeks later.”

An unexpected outcome of Perkowski’s diagnosis was a clearer sense of purpose he gained. But first his fears had to be resolved. Fortunately, that happened sooner than it likely would have in the earlier years of the HIV pandemic.

“The person delivering the news told me exactly what my brain needed to hear: ‘You’re not going to die from this.’ As time went on, I came to realize that my diagnosis was a gift. In addition to fighting for the rights of LGBTQ+ people, I fight for equal treatment for people living with HIV.”

Peter PerkowskiCourtesy of Vic Gerami

Spotting, Standing Up to Bullies

Perkowski wears a few hats as an attorney, a volunteer and an activist. He has his own firm, Perkowski Legal, focusing on entertainment and intellectual property matters. As Chair of APLA Health's Board of Directors, he's helped lead the organization during its transition from an AIDS service organization (formerly, AIDS Project Los Angeles) to a health care clinic serving LGBTQ+ and other marginalized communities while maintaining a focus on HIV care. During his tenure at APLA Health, the organization has nearly tripled its budget to $60 million, becoming one of the largest health centers in the Los Angeles area.

Experience has taught Perkowski that the work of a civil rights attorney in the LGBTQ+ and HIV spaces won't end anytime soon. Discrimination has a way of persisting and rearing its ugly head just when you think the fight is almost won. A professional history of pro-bono and the trend for bigotry and discrimination to get dressed up in so-called religious freedom are among the reasons Perkowski says he's committed to the fight for equality and justice for the long haul.

Following is Vic Gerami, founder of TBP Media and publisher of The Blunt Post's Q&A, with noted LGBTQ+ and HIV civil rights attorney, Peter Perkowski.

VG: Tell me a bit about your background, in general, as well as professional.

PP: I grew up in rural Western New York, surrounded by cows and corn. Three brothers and sisters, including an identical twin brother.

I moved to L.A. in 1993 after college—for and with a guy. The relationship didn't last, but my love of L.A. did. Although I spent three years in Washington D.C. for law school, I returned to L.A. to practice law. I've been practicing for over 20 years.

It was diagnosed with HIV in 1998. I had just finished law school and was studying for the bar, and planning to move back to Los Angeles. Despite the traumatic news, I moved and took the bar three weeks later. And passed.

What is your current position/title with Modern Military Association of America?

Legal & Policy Director. OutServe-SLDN recently merged with the American Military Partner Association and is now known as the Modern Military Association of America. I've been doing the job for almost four years, since 2015, and I previously served on the board from 2012-2013, and as a legal consultant and pro bono lawyer in 2013 and '14 for the organization.

What is MMAA's mission, objective and what are your personal goals?

MMAA's mission is to address and end – through litigation, policy advocacy, and education – all forms of unequal or unfair treatment against members of the military community—those who are serving, have served, or want to serve, and their spouses and families—on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, or HIV status.

My personal goal is to make sure all our members can thrive and succeed in their careers, access

privileges and benefits without barriers, and be treated fairly and equally. I really take it personally when this doesn't happen.

Has the need to legal intervention for LGBTQ+ service members decreased since the repeal of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'?

I don't believe so. The only thing that has changed is the reasons that service members who identify as LGBTQ+ or living with HIV need to contact us for legal services. I don't think the need has decreased.

First, for our trans patriots. In the period of just two short years, trans people experienced the whiplash of being pathologized by the military, to being accepted and recognized as the capable leaders that they truly are, and then back to being pathologized again.

Second, for people living with HIV: They face prohibitions on joining the military; cannot be commissioned as officers, even when they are already serving as enlisted; are restricted in their assignments and stations; cannot deploy with their colleagues; and therefore face difficulty in promoting and advancing. More troubling, the sex lives of people with HIV is heavily policed, such that some have even ended up criminally prosecuted and involuntarily separated merely for having sex.

Even LGB people still need legal intervention. We are seeing harassment and discrimination in some areas—under the radar, but still there—and there is a troubling amount of what we believe to be false accusations of sexual assault. It appears to be the new way of getting rid of gay and bisexual men post-repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. And of course lesbian women (women in general, really) still experience all sorts of harassment and violence in the military.

In your 20-year law career, what advancements and improvements have you seen in the type of law that you practice?

LGBTQ+ civil rights? It's been a roller-coaster. As a law student, I was in the gallery of the House of Representatives when they debated and passed the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996. It was offensive and demoralizing. But sodomy was decriminalized by the Supreme Court in 2003. Equal marriage in 2013, again by the Supreme Court. Then DOMA was entirely struck down in 2015, again by the Supreme Court. Along the way, we have had major victories that I've participated in: the California Supreme Court declaring that health-care providers can't refuse treatment against LGBTQ+ people based on religious objections, and some favorable immigration decisions from the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.

But we still face threats, particular from right-wing efforts to create religious exemptions to generally applicable antidiscrimination laws. And the Supreme Court is currently considering whether federal civil rights laws protect against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The battle never ends.

What advice do you have for LGBTQ+ service members?

For the military community: call Modern Military Association. You can't do it alone, and we can help.

We just celebrated Harvey Milk Day on this 50th anniversary of Stonewall. With Pride Month approaching, how do you reflect on the LGBTQ+ Rights Movement's past, present and future?

Past is prologue? So much is different, but so much is the same. It seems like we're fighting the same battles. I did a presentation recently at my undergrad alma mater, the University of Rochester. It compared the last 30 years (from when I started undergrad in 1988 to now, in 2018) to what we expect for the next 30. A lot of the battles look similar, but with a different twist.

What about your work do you enjoy most?

Helping people. Nothing like the feeling when a client is so relieved and grateful for the work you do.

Peter Perkowski is one of only two lawyers in the LGBTQ+/HIV civil-rights movement who are openly living with HIV. In 2010, the National LGBT Bar Association included Peter on its inaugural Best LGBT Lawyers Under 40 list.

Vic Gerami is journalist, media contributor and the Editor & Publisher of The Blunt Post.

He spent six years at Frontiers Magazine, followed by LA Weekly and Voice Media Group. His syndicated celebrity Q&A column, 10 Questions with Vic, is a LA Press Club's National Arts & Entertainment Journalism Award finalist.

In 2009, he was featured in the Wall Street Journal as a "Leading Gay Activist" for opposing Prop 8 and his marriage equality advocacy. Vic was on the planning committee of the historic Resist March in 2017 and is a founding board member of Equality Armenia.

In 2015, he was noted in the landmark Supreme Court lawsuit, Obergefell v. Hodges, in which the Court held in a 5–4 decision that the fundamental right to marry is guaranteed to same-sex couples by both the Due Process Clause and the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution.

Vic is a contributor for Windy City Times, Montrose Star, DC Life Magazine, Out & About Nashville, Q Virginia, GNI MAG, QNotes, WeHo Times, GoWeHo, Los Angeles Blade, Asbarez, California Courier, Desert Daily Guide, Armenian Weekly, GED, The Pride LA, IN Magazine, OUT Traveler and

The Advocate Magazine.

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