

Iconic psychologist Abram Maslow described “self-actualization” as the capstone of a hierarchy of all the human needs that people experience in life. Self-actualization refers to a person’s need to explore and express their talents and full potential, to test the limits of what they are capable of. It can only be addressed when other levels of basic human needs like security, safety, and belonging are met. It is a privilege denied to many people. I am grateful that in significant ways I have been able to self-actualize my leadership potential as I developed into a long-time labor leader and LGBTQ rights activist. Much of my success was possible only because it was planted in the inclusive and empowering culture of Monroe Community College and nurtured by the direct support and encouragement of some outstanding MCC employees. To illustrate I offer my experiences advocating for equal LGBTQ rights and benefits from 2004 on. Without access to legal marriage at that time, same sex couples were denied thousands of federal and state benefits. At MCC I did not have access to the same workplace spousal benefits as my co-workers as I could not legally marry my partner of 10 years, Anne. We experienced workplace disparities for bereavement, health insurance, sick time and family leave benefits because we were unable to marry. I started supporting activists who led the charge to create change for the LGBTQ community. Then the torch of leadership was offered to me. Anne & I were asked to publicly marry as a same-sex couple in an act of civil disobedience with 10 clergy members officiating. We would be the first same sex couple to ask for and be refused a marriage license in Rochester. Undoubtedly, a local media frenzy would ensue. What else might happen? Having personally experienced family rejection, discrimination and even physical assault due to my sexual orientation I feared ‘coming out of the closet’ as a lesbian couple so publicly. But I knew that visibility was needed to advance the cause of LGBTQ equality. If not us.... who? It was frightening to be so vulnerable, would we be chastised by officials? Would there be protests or even arrests? I especially feared the impact this action might have on my relationships at the workplace I loved - MCC Library.

On April 29th, 2004 Anne and I married publicly and became front page news. Television cameras came into our home to capture our life as a lesbian couple for a curious public. To change hearts and minds we had to show the public how 'ordinary' same sex couples really were. We were asked: "Who takes out the trash? Who handles the finances?" Pictures of us baking cookies for our church made the paper. It was great visibility.

Fearful of rejection, I had told few co-workers about the planned wedding, so imagine my delight when the Library Director canceled a staff meeting, so my library co-workers could attend. He showed up too, with camera in hand, to document the day for us. It was a life changing affirmation.



Returning to work the day after the spectacle of our public wedding I was fearful of the reaction of MCC administration since workplace benefit disparities were among the issues being challenged by our action. I was immediately called into the office of the President's legal counsel. Here again, I found affirmation. The attorney told me that if anyone were to give me a hard time or harass me in any way as fall out from our wedding, I should let her know immediately because the values embraced by MCC did not tolerate anti-gay sentiment. I left her office knowing I had the full support of MCC to live and work "authentically" as an out and valued MCC employee. The positive support of co-workers was overwhelming. Particularly touching was my encounter with one of the gruff building maintenance guys who came to my office and demanded to know 'why didn't you invite me to your wedding?!' He told me of the painful discrimination he himself faced when moving to Rochester from Puerto Rico and said that he was proud to know me.

The reality of being comfortably out and open about my sexual orientation at MCC provided a strong foundation for me to reach my full potential as a Union President and founder of the Pride at Work Chapter in Rochester for LGBTQ union members. My wife, Anne Tischer, and I worked progressively more intensely for marriage equality, doing lobbying, petitioning, organizing rallies, educational events and doing public speaking. Ultimately, we were recognized as being instrumental in getting the first GOP legislator ever to publicly support marriage equality...a critical vote needed to get marriage equality passed in New York State.



MCC provided ongoing leadership development opportunities, including appointing me to the Diversity Council. The workplace intentionally included LGBTQ issues in their displays and programming. LGBTQ equality issues were explored in campus 'diversity dialogues' with great graphic educational resources developed. Some, like the 'marriage rights' poster (left), were used



for years to educate the public far beyond the campus borders and now reside in the Rochester Public Library Archives. We initiated a LGBTQ "Safe Zone Training Program" which continues today. LGBTQ visibility efforts in the library, like the Pride READ poster (right) let all LGBTQ students and staff know that they are welcome and valued in the library and on campus.

Early on as an interim 'fix' for spousal health insurance disparities I went to my Union President to ask for Domestic Partner benefits. She empowered me to research and educate her on the issue and then she successfully got DP benefits into the contract. That success showed me the power of collective bargaining to create change and I became involved in the Union, ultimately becoming CSEA Local 828 President for Monroe County. I started the Rochester chapter of Pride at Work AFL-CIO, became a

member of the Rochester Labor Council Executive Board and Vice President of Pride at Work National.

Eventually I received a Lifetime Achievement award for my work in labor and human rights activism.

When I retired in 2019, I found myself grateful, not only for 25 years of a good livelihood with a sense of purpose...but I also realized what a great foundation for personal accomplishment MCC had given me. I appreciate the recognition of the Carmen Powers Legacy Lecture selection and the chance for me to give a sincere thank you to the MCC Community. Self-actualization is quite a gift to go into retirement with... how lucky I am to be part of the MCC family.