

## Bench Bar 2024 - LGBTQ+ Rights Committee

### Nex's Legacy: Legal Imperatives for the Protection of Trans Youth

#### Description:

The recent passing of Nex Benedict, a Choctaw non-binary high school student from the Cherokee Nation reservation in Owasso, Oklahoma, has cast a heavy shadow on the fight for the rights of transgender youth. Based on the panelists' personal and professional experiences, this panel will explore the current legal landscape for transgender youth, both locally and nationally, drawing attention to the correlation between escalating anti-transgender legislative activity and violence against trans youth. Given the uncertain future of transgender and Two Spirit rights in the United States, this panel also seeks to examine strategies for advocacy as well as wider policy considerations which should be implemented to protect transgender individuals, and specifically trans youth. Through advocacy and action, we hope to honor Nex's legacy and chart a brighter course for transgender advocacy and justice.

#### Moderator:

Andrew Bell (He/Him) is a member of Anderson & Labovitz's civil litigation team and the chair of the ACBA LGBTQ+ Rights Committee. After graduating from Christopher Newport University in 2012, Andrew spent two years working as a leadership consultant for his fraternity, Pi Kappa Phi, which brought him to Pittsburgh for the first time. Following his years of travel, Andrew attended Louisiana State University where he not only received his Master's Degree in Higher Education Administration but also sagacious advice from a professor which led him to take the LSAT. Ultimately, Andrew made his return to the Steel City to attend the University of Pittsburgh School of Law.

#### Speakers:

Nicky Ripley (They/Them) founded the legal services program at Hugh Lane Wellness Foundation to provide civil legal aid for low-income LGBTQ+ and HIV+ clients in Southwest Pennsylvania. Their mission is to improve social determinates of health by addressing the unique legal challenges these communities face. These primarily include name and gender marker changes, eviction defense, public benefit appeals, discrimination complaints, and expungements. Through this work, they've become a regional resource for LGBTQ+ jurisprudence and advocacy.

Massimo Terzigni (He/Him) is a Partner and trial attorney at the Law Offices of Joel Sansone. He focuses his practice on civil rights and employment discrimination and possesses over ten

years of litigation experience at both the federal and state levels. Prior to joining the Law Offices of Joel Sansone, Massimo worked with the Allegheny County Public Defender's Office, the Allegheny County Solicitor's Office and the Allegheny County Family Court's Pro Se Motions Program. Massimo received his Juris Doctor degree from the Duquesne University School of Law. While attending Duquesne Law, he was recognized for achievements in legal research and writing, legal process, clinical work in the area of federal litigation and pro bono service. Massimo also serves as a Board Member for Lebo Pride, a non-profit organization led by local LGBTQIA+ individuals and allies.

Hetal Dhagat (she/her) is a Senior Attorney in the Pittsburgh office of the Education Law Center. She supports ELC's litigation and policy advocacy across all issue areas. Previously, she engaged in litigation and advised clients on issues of environmental law. Hetal has represented families in immigration proceedings, taught English as a second language, and interned with the National Immigrant Justice Center in Chicago, Illinois. Prior to attending law school, she taught and supported an afterschool program for middle school students in Boston, Massachusetts through AmeriCorps. She also taught English to elementary school children in Costa Rica. Hetal graduated from Tufts University and the Northwestern University School of Law, where she was the Development Editor of the Journal of Technology and Intellectual Property and the recipient of a Leonard S. Rubinowitz Public Interest Fellowship.

J. Coley Alston (They/Xe) is the Program Director of the Hugh Lane Wellness Foundation. Coley is an expert in supporting LGBTQ+ youth and has led innovative youth initiatives in various roles over the past 6 years. They believe in using data to drive change in policy and culture. Coley oversees evidence-based programming for youth, caregivers, and those who serve them, including the AFFIRM Youth and AFFIRM Caregiver interventions; as well as Mental Health First Aid and Suicide Prevention trainings. Coley adapted the AFFIRM Youth intervention for digital implementation to support LGBTQ+ youth remotely during an isolated time.

Media Guide:

The Trevor Project Research Brief: Data on Transgender Youth, February 2019

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-Trevor-Project-Research-Brief-February-2019.pdf>

A Federal Investigation Has Been Launched Into Nex Benedict's School District, By James Factora, March 4, 2024 <https://www.them.us/story/a-federal-investigation-has-been-launched-into-nex-benedicts-school-district>

What Does It Mean to Be Two-Spirit? By Quispe López, November 21, 2023

<https://www.them.us/story/what-does-two-spirit-mean-according-to-indigiqueer-people>

Pennsylvania landscape for trans youth:

York County: South Western School Board tentatively adopts controversial gender identity policy (2024) <https://www.eveningsun.com/story/news/local/2024/02/29/south-western-school-board-tentatively-adopts-gender-identity-policy/72793074007/>

Luzerne County, Wyoming Valley School District: Mom sues Pa. school district on behalf of transgender teen who killed herself (2023) <https://www.pennlive.com/news/2023/10/mom-sues-pa-school-district-on-behalf-of-transgender-teen-who-killed-herself.html>

Franklin County: GOP-led Chambersburg becomes first Pa. town to revoke LGBTQ inclusive law (2022) <https://www.pennlive.com/news/2022/01/gop-led-chambersburg-becomes-first-pa-town-to-revoke-lgbtq-inclusive-law.html>

Bucks County: New Democrat-led board in Central Bucks takes control, reverses controversial policies (2023) <https://www.phillyburbs.com/story/news/local/2023/12/05/new-central-bucks-board-democrats-lucabaugh-severance-transgender-athletes-library-policy-pa/71804991007/>

Lancaster County: Asking Why Four Young Trans People Have Died by Suicide in Lancaster, PA (2024) <https://www.pghlesbian.com/2024/03/asking-why-four-young-trans-people-have-died-by-suicide-in-lancaster-pa/>

Local landscape for trans youth:

Mount Lebanon School District: Local groups urge federal court to support LGBTQ-inclusive lessons at Mt. Lebanon School District (2024) <https://www.wesa.fm/education/2024-02-15/lgbtq-inclusive-lessons-mt-lebanon-school>

Pine-Richland: Judge rules Pine-Richland parent can't challenge school district's transgender policy (2024) <https://triblive.com/local/judge-rules-that-pine-richland-parent-cant-challenge-school-districts-transgender-policy/>

Title IX Updates:

Biden's new Title IX rules protect LGBTQ+ students, but avoid addressing transgender athletes (2024)

<https://apnews.com/article/title-ix-sexual-assault-transgender-sports-d0fc0ab7515de02b8e4403d0481dc1e7>