

# OUR STORIES



## Elizabeth Schwartz, Esq.

Liz met NCLR at a house party in Miami over twenty years ago, and the rest is herstory! Liz is the principal at [Elizabeth F. Schwartz Attorneys & Mediators](#), and has been practicing law since 1997 with a focus on LGBTQ families. She is an author, lecturer and has been widely recognized for her work. In addition to being a long time supporter, Liz has co-counseled cases with NCLR, is a member of our National Family Law Advisory Council and a pillar for our work in Miami, FL. Read more about what has inspired Liz's long time partnership with NCLR and her hopes for the road ahead!

### HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED WITH NCLR?

Miami was blessed with some early NCLR champions, including Dr. Carla Lupi and Raquel Matas, a longtime dean at University of Miami School of Law. I was a law student in the mid-late 90s and had the great, good fortune to get an invite from Raquel to the annual house party they held for many years benefiting NCLR. And as I'm sure is heard many times in response to this question, I heard (former Executive Director) Kate Kendell speak and was hooked. She described the [now-infamous](#) case of Mary Ward, which NCLR was litigating at that

time: a Florida lesbian who lost custody of her child to her ex-husband, who was convicted of murdering his first wife in a custody dispute. Mary lost custody solely because she was a lesbian. Hearing Kate describe this injustice lit a fire in me that burns bright to this day. I started volunteering for whatever NCLR needed and that evolved into partnering with NCLR on cases it brought in Florida including those to overturn our ban against LGBTQ+ people adopting children, to challenge the ban to our freedom to marry, and for fair issuance of birth certificates to children born to legally-married same-gender parents.

### **WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE NCLR MEMORY?**

This is a toss-up. Watching the brilliant NCLR legal team argue *Pareto v Ruvin*, a pivotal marriage equality case out of Miami, was historic and amazing, but for my favorite memory, I have to give it up to meeting Jane Lynch at the Anniversary Gala one year. It was during her time on *The L Word* where she played lawyer Joyce Wishnia. I took great pleasure in telling her some of the ways her character has it wrong about we queer lawyers. Just as we were wrapping up her very good-natured welcoming of my reality check, she met Lara Embry, who was a plaintiff in a pivotal Florida case NCLR won for LGBTQ+ parents. They fell in love at first sight and were together for years thereafter.

### **WHAT MOTIVATES YOU TO GIVE TO NCLR?**

I have so many motivations but here are my top 3:

1. I love that NCLR often resolves issues under the radar and, because it may be strategic to not publicize their win, they resist the temptation to send out a press release lauding the victory. This, to me, speaks to the feminist soul of the organization: deep passion for the work without the need to take credit at any cost. The commitment to always ensuring the best outcome for the most people, even if it means keeping quiet when spreading the word could increase donations and visibility, is one of the reasons I feel my support is so important.
2. This sounds awfully militaristic but it's true: NCLR is on the front lines and in the trenches on every issue impacting our community. NCLR doesn't wait for a case to hit the highest courts in the land to get involved. They identify an injustice impacting vulnerable people and they work to fix it, even if it's not on-trend.
3. My clients and I are personal beneficiaries of NCLR's commitment to the model of partnering and true information-sharing with grassroots activists nationwide. Some 17 years ago, NCLR formed a practitioner's roundtable of lawyers who serve LGBTQ+ families. Each year (when there's not a pandemic), NCLR brings us together in San Francisco and we gather with members of NCLR's team to brainstorm and share strategies that have won and lost. We talk about what's on the horizon and how to advocate for ALL of our community in some of the most challenging jurisdictions to do so. We are 40 or so lawyers who hail from all over the U.S. and we are what's known as NCLR's National Family Law Advisory Council. NFLAC has been transformative to the individuals and families we serve. I'm getting emotional just thinking about it. NFLAC is one of the LGBTQ+ legal movement's most powerful change agents that no one knows about. Supporting NCLR means effecting change on that granular level.

### **WHAT IS ONE WORD TO DESCRIBE NCLR?**

Indefatigable

### **WHAT ARE YOUR HOPES FOR NCLR IN THIS NEW CHAPTER OF LEADERSHIP AND OF OUR MOVEMENT FOR LGBTQ JUSTICE?**

My hope is the NCLR team, led by Imani's sharp mind and warm smile, will engage more folks nationwide in supporting this work. From my perspective in a state where making change at the legislative level is a particular challenge, our focus must be trained on the courts. NCLR needs more lawyers willing to roll up their sleeves and engage in pro bono work. We've got our job cut out for us in terms of the generations it's going to take to undo the damage done by the blessedly-now-former occupant of the White House and the hundreds of lifetime judicial appointments he has made.

So we need all hands on deck to fight injustice and dismantle the systemic oppression which impacts so many of us, each in different ways. NCLR's intersectional approach to advocacy means that it is perfectly positioned to coalesce folks across every divide to link arms and achieve full lived equality for all. Some of the most important conversations our community is now having are trails blazed by members of the NCLR team. Shannon Minter has been talking about the harms of conversion therapy for 25 years. Tyrone Hanley's anti-poverty work is now a deeper focus of attention. Discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ people living in rural areas has been on the NCLR radar for decades.

As a non-San Francisco supporter, I very much wish to see NCLR step into the "national" part of its name more and leverage what for many is a newfound sense of comfort with technology connecting us more intimately. NCLR is still a too-well-kept secret for many. I'm always happy to spread the NCLR gospel and I hope we can get more evangelists in every corner of the U.S. to hop on the bus!