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Lawyers Weekly Diversity Heroes

MICHELE E. GRANDA

A vacation gone tragically wrong spurs this lawyer to forsake a big-firm practice and take on the cause of gay rights region-wide

Birth: Aug. 8, 1966; Wilmington, Del.

Education: Georgetown University Law Center (1993); Stanford University (1988)

Bar admission: 1993

Professional experience: Staff attorney, Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders (2003-present); associate and partner, McDermott, Will & Emery (1995-2003); associate, Palmer & Dodge (1993-1995)

Honors/achievements: "Obtaining the right [in 2006] for Rhode Island same-sex couples to marry in Massachusetts" as lead attorney for GLAD

Role models: Shirley Chisholm of New York, the first black woman to run for president (in 1972); former Colorado congresswoman Patricia Schroeder; former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor; and "my mother, because she's a determined, strong woman who has really taught me about independence and struggle and self-confidence."

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Five years ago, Boston attorney Michele E. Granda set out on a Caribbean vacation with her partner, Kate Hogan, also a Boston lawyer, never suspecting that a respite in the British Virgin Islands would profoundly change her life — personally and professionally.

The two women were in a kayak, taking in the breezy, balmy weather, when a speedboat caromed over them. Hogan died a couple of hours later in a nearby hospital; Granda was, in her own words, "psychically injured."

"That experience revealed to me how vulnerable the lives of gays and lesbians are to discrimination and hostility," Granda says. "In the emergency room, when they realized who I was, they asked me to leave the room, and Kate died without me there."

The U.S. Embassy, she continues, "called to get Kate's father's contact information to notify next of kin, saying [to Granda], 'I'm sorry, but you don't count.' I wasn't a widow or a widower; the world did not give me a word to describe who I was to [Hogan] and who she was to me, both in life and in death."

Bereft, Granda returned to Boston and her job at the firm of McDermott, Will & Emery but found she was "incapable of working." She asked for and was granted a leave of absence.

"As I was getting my feet back under me, I got a greater understanding of what was meaningful to me and how I might make a difference in the world with the skills I have," Granda says. "Working as an income partner at a firm, you sometimes lose sight of what's personally meaningful to you. ... It became important to me that work itself had to have meaning."

With that realization in mind, Granda signed up as a volunteer at Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders in Boston. When GLAD's staff attorney position became vacant, she was there to fill it.

The organization has been involved in litigation related to the ongoing campaign for a constitutional amendment that would ban gay marriage in Massachusetts, and Granda has been key to that involvement — "in all GLAD's efforts to preserve and protect gay marriage."

She also has focused her advocacy of gay rights on neighboring Rhode Island.

"One case I'm working on is to continue to build respect and support for the marriages in Massachusetts of [same-sex couples who are] Rhode Island residents," Granda explains. "In another case in Rhode Island, we're challenging a school system's decision not to give family leave to a teacher to care for her hospitalized partner. [The school system] said she could, if she were related by blood or by marriage, but same-sex couples can't marry in Rhode Island."

With a regional reach, GLAD and its staff attorney have taken on cases in other New England states. New Hampshire's refusal to grant partner benefits to gay and lesbian state employees has caught Granda's attention, as has the Vermont case that led to civil unions for same-sex couples. "We're very much a New England organization," she says.

But it is predominantly in Massachusetts that Granda does her advocating and defending — "an incredibly warm and receptive place for gays and lesbians, particularly when compared to the rest of the nation," she says, quickly adding, "That's not to say there are not incidents of discrimination and difficulty."

Asked if the state's legal community is an inviting place for gay and lesbian attorneys, Granda reports that "there is support" for them and for gay and lesbian judges.

"But I think there are many gay and lesbian lawyers who feel uncomfortable about being open with their clients," she says, cautioning against allowing that discomfort to prevail. "When you hide who you are, it makes it harder to interact with your clients — and with your colleagues."