

# Proskauer, Pro Bono and Pride: A Q&A with LGBTQ+ Nonprofit Founder Michael Narain

**Proskauer For Good** on July 10, 2019

*This post contains sensitive subject matter.*

We sat down with [Michael Narain](#), the founder of [Out My Closet](#), to talk about the vital role this nonprofit organization plays in the lives of at-risk LGBTQ+ youth and how Proskauer's pro bono collaboration has helped to advance the organization's mission.

**In your own words, what does Out My Closet do and why is this work important and impactful?**

LGBTQ+ youth experience disproportionate levels of homelessness and mental health issues, and are more likely to suffer from substance abuse and sexual exploitation. Out My Closet is a nonprofit organization that attempts to combat those trends by offering resources such as clothing, counseling, and connectivity to LGBTQ+ youth. We provide direct social services that feature face-to-face connection such as clothing pop-up shops, as well as support through [social media platforms](#) that connect LGBTQ+ youth to each other and to our volunteers. Out My Closet is staffed entirely by volunteers, many of whom are in their 20s and 30s, LGBTQ+, of color, immigrants, and the first in their families to be college-educated. There's a real power in seeing someone not much older than you who made it through – and in being helped by someone who can understand and relate to your personal experiences.

**Can you talk about the early days of Out My Closet? What inspired the idea, and how did you build it from the ground up?**

In 2013, I was working with a substance abuse methadone program. Being a young clinician who was open about my sexual orientation, I was often assigned LGBTQ+ youth – and I was excited about working with them. One of my clients was a gay teenager whose mother had tried to sell him for drug money. He was sodomized and contracted HIV at a young age. By the time he arrived at my clinic, he was using about every drug you can imagine and living on the streets. I felt a connection with him. Every time I saw him, he complimented me on my outfit, telling me “If there’s any clothing you don’t want, I’ll take it.” He ended up taking his life that summer.

His death pushed me to do more. At the time I was a YouTube blogger, and although I was doing important work in speaking words of encouragement, I felt compelled to expand my efforts. Then, I received an email about a father who was housing three LGBTQ+ runaways who needed clothing. I arrived with a bunch of clothes and snacks, and connected them with the services I was familiar with through my work. I realized I could do this on a larger scale; I could create a charitable organization.

I named the nonprofit “Out My Closet” for a couple reasons. I don’t see “the closet” as a bad thing. I think it’s a place where we build the strength we need to come out. As for “My Closet,” I think the possessive represents that it’s something personal – it’s about me giving to another LGBTQ+ person.

### **Tell us about Out My Closet’s relationship with Proskauer.**

I was attending a leadership program when I met a colleague of [David Miller](#), a partner in Proskauer’s tax group. He connected me to David, who offered to help us on a pro bono basis. Before David, I was carrying around a Nonprofits for Dummies book. David and his paralegal, Carrie Slaton, got us incorporated and helped us obtain 501(c)3 tax exempt status – because of that, we could start applying for grants and other kinds of funding. When we expanded to Florida and California, David and Carrie did all the filing for that, too. They are both delightful to work with – it means so much to work with people who really care about the organization and its mission. It’s been an amazing experience, and Proskauer’s pro bono work has been crucial in solidifying the organization’s foundation.

**Your organization provides clothing in a unique way – through pop-up shops that replicate the traditional shopping experience. Can you tell us more about that?**

Clothing is so important, especially to LGBTQ+ youth. Instead of sifting through worn, unstylish, or dirty clothes handed to them in garbage bags, we provide new or lightly worn clothing in our pop-up shops, which have 800-1000 items at a time. Being able to pick clothing that matches their style, size, and gender expression is vital in giving them a feeling of dignity. Maybe they can finally wear the clothes their parents couldn't afford or never let them buy – and that's invaluable.

Clothing is important in other ways too. A professional outfit for a job interview can make all the difference. When you're wearing something quality that you like, you feel great about yourself. Many people don't want to show they are struggling, and nice clothing gives them control over their narrative and presentation.

**One of your initiatives, Campus Connect, reduces homophobic beliefs among youth through education. How does your organization approach that?**

Our approach is through a curriculum that focuses on inclusivity – our agenda isn't strictly for LGBTQ+ youth. Bullying occurs in many different ways, and we try to ground our work in the real ways that youth today struggle. We outline behaviors and actions in terms of the challenges they may be facing, and tie it to consequences like depression and mental health problems. Through this method, young people cultivate compassion and learn how their actions affect others. And when they use hurtful, homophobic terminology, we meet them where they are and let them understand the consequences of it. Our other actions are more direct. We have young advocates write words of encouragement and empowerment – we expect that when young people see their peers engaging in positive behavior, they will too.

**How can people best support Out My Closet?**

There are a lot of different ways to get involved. An easy way is donating! Clothing, time, but also the traditional way. The benefit of having a young, diverse group of volunteers is that we are able to connect with LGBTQ+ youth, but it also means that we had a harder time getting the attention of those with funding and influence. With proper funding, we can continue providing resources and expand our reach to more LGBTQ+ youth. You can also be an advocate. How you live your life day-by-day, treating LGBTQ+ individuals in your community in a compassionate and inclusive way, is an important and constant way you can help.

[View Original](#)