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## For Foster Garvey, a merger led to a fresh DEI start

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Nearly two years ago, Seattle-based law firms Foster Pepper and Garvey Schubert Barer merged to establish Foster Garvey.

The merger meant many things for the former firms, and chief among them was expanding their reach. Foster Garvey is now the 16th largest firm in the Portland area, with six offices worldwide.

But the merger also served as an opportunity to do something different.

“We saw [the merger] as an opportunity to not only come together as a community, but really decide what values that we hold dear,” said Foster Garvey Associate Paul Heer. “Part of that process and part of that work meant taking this first principles approach to diversity, equity and inclusion.”

Heer is a co-chair, with Bryan Helfer, on Foster Garvey’s Opportunity and Progress Council, the firm’s diversity, equity and inclusion initiative.



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Foster Garvey Opportunity Progress Council co-chairs Bryan Helfer (left) and Paul Heer (right) shared the firm's DEI progress.

Members of the OPC sought to avoid the traditional top-down structure that other DEI committees tend to fall into. The council, officially established with the merger, aimed to bring all different levels of staff and attorneys to the DEI conversation with equal footing.

Early on, the OPC redesigned how the firm approaches DEI training. Traditional DEI training is often done in a day, Heer noted. Foster Garvey wanted to adopt a more robust program.

“We decided to create a custom internal curriculum for our firm professionals that builds upon itself each quarter,” Heer said. “The idea is you meet folks where they’re at, you build this base of understanding, and then every quarter you’re building on that training.”

Foster Garvey has also looked outward to help diversify the law industry. The firm was a founding participant in the Washington Joint Minority Mentorship Program, which works with minority bar associations to help connect diverse law students with mentors.

The firm had participated in the program before the merger, with Foster Garvey serving 200-plus law students.

“We started that program with the simple idea that we saw a bunch of young diverse law students who didn’t have appropriate mentorship, who didn’t have someone to talk to,” Heer said. “They’re first-generation folks who, frankly, like myself, learn through trial and error. I remember when I was a law student, looking around and not quite knowing who I could ask those questions to and that context from.”

As it reimagines its approach to DEI work and creates a more inclusive work environment, Foster Garvey released its [Declared Name and Pronouns policy](#) earlier this month.

The firm hopes to both foster a more accepting community and set a standard to move this work forward in the industry. The firm hopes that opening up its policy template will allow other law offices to easily adopt similar policies in the future, according to marketing and communications manager Paul Matulac.

“Not calling people out, but bringing them into the conversation,” Helfer said.

Heer and Helfer both acknowledged HR Specialist Michaila Nolan’s significant contributions to moving the Declared Name and Pronouns and other policies forward.

“Our decision as OPC to make sure that we were truly representative was not to do what most folks do in our industry, which is have a committee of attorneys,” Heer said. “Kayla is a great example of that. She’s not an attorney. She’s able to not only bring forward much better ideas than we could have come up with, but frankly she was able to push so much of the work forward.”

Foster Garvey has also worked to diversify its workplace. Both of the firm’s co-chairs and 67% of the leadership are from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, according to Heer. That’s a message Foster Garvey wants to use to hire more diverse partners.

The firm also sponsors its own diversity fellowship program and hosts such opportunities with organizations like the Multnomah Bar Association.

The company has associated itself with several organizations promoting DEI in law firms across the country, including the Law Firm Antiracism Alliance.

Moving forward, Foster Garvey hopes to develop policies like the one introduced earlier this month as it reflects internally on ways to become a more equitable institution.

“We’re not shying away from the important aspects of DEI, in fact, we’re embracing them in a way we think can be translatable and more of a way to call people into the conversation,” Helfer said. “I’ve been out of law school for 15 years. I tell Paul Heer and others that you have to get where I am faster than I am. We have to create that opportunity in a more efficient manner.”

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