



Office of Civil Rights

Representing Diversity

Caltrans is spotlighting Disadvantaged Business Enterprise: Laner Electric Supply Co., Inc. during Pride Month. This year is especially noteworthy for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) community since the Supreme Court ruled on June 15, 2020, that Title VII Prohibits Discrimination Against LGBTQ Employees.

Imagine arriving in the USA at age 9 from a different country. Your religion, your society, your culture, and even your own family condemn you because you are attracted to the same gender.

Sandra Escalante has lived through this experience, and more.

Her family migrated to Virginia from the Philippines and then moved to California when she was 12.

“In the late 1970s, being a lesbian wasn’t something that most adults understood or accepted, especially if you’re Catholic and Filipino,” said Escalante. “I remember my mom taking me to church and so that the priest could speak with me. She also asked my school counselor to refer me to a psychologist because I wasn’t normal.”



“My childhood was tough,” said the electrical contractor, turned CEO of an electrical supply wholesaler. “I can relate to the homeless [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer] LGBTQ youth here in the Bay Area. I imagine that for some, their families may have rejected them for not understanding that for some of us, this is not a choice or phase, it is who and what we were born to be.”

In line with that - on June 15, 2020, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a historic ruling that Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination against LGBTQ employees. The ruling provides nation-wide protection for employees, rather than the patchwork of state and local laws that prohibit LGBTQ discrimination.

And while the LGBTQ community is now protected as employees, it was different on the school yard for Escalante. She coped with being rejected and ostracized by overachieving.

Fast forward to 2020, Escalante owns 51% of Laner Electric Supply. The remaining share of the company is owned by the founder, Jim Laner. The company has a variety of certifications, including LGBTQ, Minority / Woman-owned, Small Business, and it is also a Disadvantaged Business Enterprise.

These certifications do not guarantee success, but they do grant Escalante more public works job invitations than she would otherwise receive. But it’s still not easy.

According to Escalante, “We are usually a second-or third-tier project participant, so unless the contracting agency procures [buys] directly from us, we have to rely on being approached by a prime contractor, or their electrical sub-contractor for material supply opportunities.” She continued, “We are the newest kids on the block and most procurement personnel have already established their relationships with other suppliers, which makes it very challenging for us.”

Escalante represents the LGBTQ community as she volunteers her time on the small business advisory councils of the Bay Area Rapid Transit, Department of General Services, University of California, Caltrans Statewide Small Business Council, and the city of Richmond’s Workforce Development board.

“I am trying to educate businesses and pave the way for LGBTQ entrepreneurs,” she said. “It’s in me. I am doing my best to advocate for all that I represent, to assure that we have a voice, and to gain traction for an equal footing. I did not have a preconceived agenda when I agreed to serve on these boards. My company doesn’t have any contracts in place with any of these agencies.”

“In the electrical supply industry, and the construction industry generally, I am truly a unicorn,” Escalante said. “The electrical supply industry is generally under-represented by women. Only a few companies are women owned. I go to a supplier and manufacturer trade conference every year with 5,000 other people. Maybe 500

attendees are women. One hundred of those are women of color. But I can assure you that I am probably the only lesbian, minority woman who is an owner of an Electrical Supply company. I tend to stand out, and shine like a rainbow-colored unicorn.”

To get certified as a Disadvantaged Business Enterprise visit [Caltrans' Website](#).