

Outstanding Voices: David Johnson, Navos

SUBSCRIBER CONTENT: Jun 8, 2018, 2:00am PDT



ANTHONY BOLANTE | PSBJ

David Johnson is the CEO of Navos.

[David Johnson](#) has been a leader in the mental health community for decades, not only as CEO of Navos, one of the largest mental health centers in Washington.

He has also served on a variety of task forces and local and national boards, innovating pathways for wellness and equity, including for the LGBTQ community.

Was there a story or an instance that inspired you to become more vocal on issues of equality? I am passionate about decreasing the tragedy of suicide. For those of us who are sexual minorities, the growing awareness of our differences from heterosexual peers can take us down the path of self-loathing and dread of being discovered. Every success we have in making society not only more accepting of sexual minorities, but actually celebrating and being glad to include LGBTQ folks, decreases the likelihood of isolation and people wrongly concluding that the world might be better off if they were dead. My mission is to champion vibrant lives for LGBTQ people based on their strengths rather than being stuck in their mistaken sense that they are somehow “wrong” and shouldn’t expect others to treat them with respect rather than disdain.

When did you begin to view yourself as a leader in the LGBTQ community? Beginning in my mid-30s, I was a trainer and spokesperson for men’s issues. I promoted possibilities of ways for men to express themselves

and pursue their dreams rather than simply complying with the “Middle America” norms that limited so many men for so long. In my early 50s I decided to become a stronger voice and action-taker. I focused more specifically on finding ways for communities, workplaces and kinship circles to not only acknowledge but actually welcome LGBTQ members. I have reached out to and championed emerging leaders, encouraging them to form alliances with other LGBTQ folks in positions of influence and to aspire for leadership positions they might not have considered possible. I make a point of casually sharing that I am gay and a CEO when I am with groups or individuals who might find it surprising to further underscore how normal it should be and can be.

Washington state outlawed conversion therapy earlier this year, something you had urged legislators to consider in December 2016.

What did you learn through that process? I appreciated how many fine people came to realize the need for halting the practice, which intensifies the sense of shame, the self-loathing and the growing internal hopelessness for those convinced that they must become inauthentic in order to earn their place in their families and in the greater community. I was surprised it took as much explaining as it did for some to fully understand why this is so important. But, I learned that telling others about my sexual orientation and my deep feelings of anguish about the process of conversion therapy was my most successful way to help others mature on this topic.

Tell us a little about POW. About 10 years ago we launched our POW! (Proud Out and Wonderful!) leadership development program for LGBTQ youth as a response to the dearth of programs in South King County. Since its inception, members have marched in annual pride parades as a group, organized annual sexual health workshops for teens in their community, and held alternative proms and other social events ensuring a safe space for their members, many of whom have yet to come out to their families.

How has your work with young adults informed your outlook on broader LGBTQ discussions? There has been terrible carnage resulting from so many young people who have taken their own lives. I seek out ways to encourage LGBTQ people to perceive of themselves as probably more skilled in resilience and creativity than others who have not had to travel from profound self-doubt to pride. I encourage them to be proud of their differences and to have their lives be about their talents and capacities instead of about how the ignorance of others leads those others to perceive LGBTQ people so negatively.

Do you have a mentor or someone who has influenced your leadership style? I am proud of my doctorate in administration and servant leadership earned at Seattle University. It was through the research for that degree that I established what would become my life's work of creating lives that are strengths-based and mission-focused in the pursuit of resiliency over the most tragic life experiences.

David M. Johnson

- CEO, Navos
- Years at company: 20
- Age: 68
- Lives in: Seattle
- Favorite place for a lunch meeting: Salty's on Alki
- More about David: If he were not in his current career, David said he would be an architect.