

Debevoise Partner: Stuttering Made Me a Better Leader

Eric Dinallo, chair of the insurance regulatory practice at Debevoise & Plimpton and chair of the American Institute for Stuttering, said stuttering doesn't need to hold back any lawyer's career.

By Brenda Sapino Jeffreys
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Debevoise & Plimpton partner Eric Dinallo, who chairs the firm's insurance regulatory practice, is a lifelong stutterer and the chair of the American Institute for Stuttering in New York.

The AIS provides specialized therapy for stuttering, and Dinallo recently hosted a virtual fundraiser gala that featured a conversation with presidential candidate Joe Biden and actress and producer Emily Blunt.

Dinallo first joined Debevoise in 2010, but returned in March after a two-year stint as executive vice president and general counsel at Guardian Life Insurance Co. He's had a varied career, including time as a state prosecutor in New York County, global head of regulatory affairs for Morgan Stanley and New York state superintendent of insurance, and he was a candidate for New York attorney general in 2010.

Dinallo recently spoke with *The American Lawyer* about how stuttering has affected his work and why he is willing to talk openly about his speech difficulties.

The conversation has been edited for length and style.

Brenda Jeffreys: You are the new chairman of the American Institute for Stuttering. Why were you interested in that role, and what do you hope to accomplish?

Eric Dinallo: I've been a lifelong stutterer, and the American Institute for Stuttering reflects a lot of my philosophy of teaching, and a real emphasis on pediatric and clinical work, which was the approach I followed. There are different approaches out there, and I felt the AIS reflected a lot of what I believed in [and it's] also geographically very close to my wife and me in Manhattan.

Our son showed real symptoms early on, and I'm happy for him that it finally evaporated ... In the last couple of years, we [at the AIS] have been part of accomplishing this by providing a lot more accurate knowledge of stuttering,

destigmatizing it, so there are less people making fun of it or bullying.

Being able to manage your stuttering is being comfortable talking about it, because hiding it makes it worse and worse. Sometimes stutterers think they can hide it. And the problem is, as you grow personally and professionally ... it has a tendency to keep on growing the more you hide it. I did therapy as an adult [and] every new level gives a stutterer a new challenge. Basically, if you are an adult, it's always there.

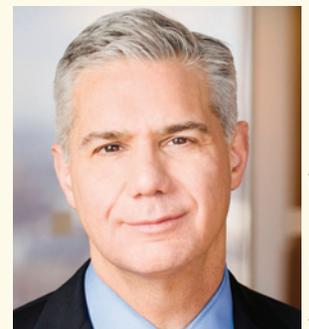
I feel there's never a time when I say I'm fluent. I can do TV interviews and talk to you and debate, but there's never a day I wake up and say I'm not a stutterer.

BJ: Why are you willing to talk about your stuttering publicly?

ED: There's frankly, one self-serving reason, because the more I talk about it the more comfortable I've become. I reduce my anxiety about it, and I'm an increasingly fluent speaker when I need to be. I want to spread the word that there is a cure for the youngest and therapy for adults.

Right now, there's not a month that has gone by in the past couple years ... where someone hasn't reached out to me about stuttering, which is very, very satisfying. You can almost hear the relief in their voice, because they have felt ashamed. You have to find ways to reduce the tension and anxiety about it.

It's been positive professionally. When I've been in management, in leadership roles, showing we all have things to overcome, it makes you authentic.



Eric Dinallo, partner
Debevoise & Plimpton,
New York.

Photo: Courtesy Photo

BJ: How do you think former Vice President Joe Biden's acknowledgment of his stuttering affects his candidacy for president?

ED: This is a really, really interesting question. It will be on balance somewhere between neutral and positive. His whole persona is authentic—a real person—and this kind of adds to it, the fact that he struggled with this. He cataloged between moderate to severe stuttering when he was young. The fact he is a presidential candidate and a former vice president, it just adds to his story of adversity. It inspired me, both to think I could run for office and write some of the articles I have written.

But, there are still people out there that just don't know much about stuttering, and they will throw it on the heap of a psychological issue, which it not true. We are just turning a corner in this country, and it's been kind of wonderful to see that people don't mind if their leaders have a genuine issue that make it so that the average person can relate to them. That's a big jump in our politics.

BJ: Has stuttering ever affected your law practice or your career? Did you ever feel judged?

ED: There were times in my career when I felt I was not as effective as I could have been because I was not using the words I wanted to use in the moment. I was going to stutter on them, and I substituted, which is a classic defense mechanism for stutterers.

The treatment I received from everyone who was in a role of supervisor, including judges in the system, federal and state and colleagues at Debevoise, I never felt I was judged. It was clear I was a stutterer, open and stuttering. But as a child, children especially back then—we are going back over 40 years, 45 years—you got teased a lot, and I certainly was bullied. But, I don't have any resentment about it.

Law school was when I really started to work on stuttering voluntarily. It went all the way through Paul Weiss [as a young associate] and the DA's office. Probably by the time I was 35, as bureau chief at the AG's office and on my way to Morgan Stanley, I wasn't substituting as much, but right through my mid-30s, I felt I could have been a more articulate or a better speaker. By the way, when I prepared for the debates when running for AG, I felt like I was putting in twice as much time to get the mechanics of speaking correctly.

BJ: What advice would you give to law students who stutter?

ED: Be more open about it. If you have supervisors, if you are going into a clerkship or whatever, talk about it. Talk about it to your friends and your colleagues and your supervisors. Say,

'You may see me stuttering more, because I'm working on therapy.' That right there, when you speak those sentences to a core group of people, you are going to make progress.

Speak to people like clinicians at AIS. It's hard work. Think of it as walking—it's hard to change how you speak. When I do give people advice on this, I give them the upside. If you succeed in this and it doesn't hold you back ... it creates in stutterers a lot more empathy. It made me a better manager and leader because of that.

You have to decide what kind of a person you are going to be and [what kind of] professional. You've got to get the basic mechanics good enough that you can speak fluently enough. That's the number one issue, if [speech] blocks go on too long, it hurts the flow.

BJ: Has the pandemic had a greater impact on people who stutter?

ED: My instinct on this when I first thought about it was that the pandemic would make it easier on stutterers, because they are home more and it's a comfort zone for them. But what I'm hearing is that clinical demands are way up. Think about it—two reasons are kind of ironic. The comfort zone I've talked about also relates to anxiety about going back to work. It's "Oh my gosh. I have to go back to work." And the second thing is that the telephone and Zooming and all the remote working is actually the stutterer's biggest nightmare, because when the adult stutterer is blocking and when there's no sound from them, that encourages more substitution and anxiety. It's really, really hard.

BJ: You are chairman of Debevoise's insurance regulatory practice. Was that expected when you returned to the firm after your in-house job? What are your plans during this time of a pandemic?

ED: It was one of the reasons I returned and it was great to come back to Debevoise. I did not expect the firm to give me that opportunity. I love the insurance regulatory space, but it is a bit wonky, at times.

What did you think when you saw 13-year Brayden Harrington, who stutters, talk during the Democratic National Convention about how meeting with former vice president Joe Biden inspired him?

Dinallo: So brave and courageous. For the rest of his life, he will find it a little easier to speak. It will be a little bit easier the next time. That young man will be more confident.

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