

## “My D&I Story”



### Jay Blocker – Learning & Development Manager, Groveland, FC

For the month of June, we celebrate PRIDE, a commemoration that honors the 1969 Stonewall Uprising in New York, an event commonly known as the tipping point for the Gay Liberation Movement in the United States. Throughout the month, events are held all across the country to raise awareness about the current state of LGBTQ+ human rights and how organizations are working to protect and advocate for those rights. Suicide awareness and prevention are among the work being done.

It is estimated that nearly 52 percent of individuals in the LGBTQ+ community experience depression, with nearly 30% of adults having attempted suicide in their lifetime. Suicide is also the number two cause of death for LGBTQ+ individuals between the ages of 10-24. (thetrevorproject.org). To help us kick off PRIDE month, we're excited to have Jay Blocker, learning & development manager for our Groveland fulfillment center, share his personal story of challenges with inclusion as an openly gay man.

“My story is one I have lived my entire life. I grew up in a small town in Indiana, and very early on I realized I was gay. Because of this, I have known discrimination for most of my life. The amount of hatred that is shown to someone who is out at a young age is overwhelming to say the least. I can recall going to sporting events at my high school and having things thrown at me and being told that I should die because of who I was. When there were violent episodes in school some of the teachers encouraged the bullies to ‘take care of the sicko’. Like many young, gay individuals, I



Jay Blocker

thought often of suicide to escape all the pain and loneliness caused by just being me. All that I wanted was a moment of peace and to not have to feel ashamed of who I was. I thought suicide was the only way to achieve this. Thankfully, my sister helped me more than she'll ever know. When I was still at home, she was the stronger personality and made sure that I knew she loved me and would always be by my side.

Finding other gay friends and getting to know a local [PFLAG](#) chapter helped me see a light at the end of what I thought was an endless, dark tunnel. I moved to Louisville, Kentucky once I was old enough, and found a community to help support me with how to live my life. This community taught me to live not as a freak or someone who was hell-bound or cursed, but as someone who deserves to live and love. Through the community, I started to build many friendships with individuals who did not have support systems through their families or friends. I often heard stories of abandonment by families for no other reason than being who they were. It's because of these stories, and my own experiences, that I became very passionate about suicide awareness and prevention.



Jay & his husband, Justin

I eventually moved back home, and in the spring of 2011, started to work at the Ruler Logistics DC in Seymour, Indiana. When I first started at the site, I was very unsure if I could be myself, I was after all back in that small town with limited viewpoints and very few open arms. Eventually, I settled into my new role and became a little more relaxed. I had the opportunity to become involved in Our Promise Team and assumed the role of national rep for my site. Being a national representative allowed me to meet people from across the organization and hear stories of just how diverse our company is. These new relationships ignited my passion for the Kroger family. We really are one very diverse group of people and I love that I get to come to work every day and be a part of it. I met so many people in my Kroger family that were able to make me see that I can be 100% me all the time and that I made a difference to them.

I know that there are people out there who are still afraid to let others see the real them. My advice is to find people who love and care for you and keep them close. Utilize resources like local support groups and ARG's. Realize that even though you may feel like you are alone, you are not.

Recently, I was able to take part in the Tampa PRIDE event to help introduce Kroger to Florida. Many of our team members were able to either help at the festival booth or be a part of the parade. My site leader and I were able to be on stage and speak as a part of the opening ceremony. I never dreamed when I was younger that I would ever find myself standing next to this amazing leader kicking off an event this large. My husband was with me for this event, and he kept remarking that he has never seen this level of support for the LGBTQ+ community from any company he has ever been a part of. He told me that he finally realized why I love my job so much, even when it gets crazy sometimes.



(Center) Brandon McBurney, SSCM, (Right) Jay Blocker

For those who are not a part of the LGBTQ+ community, I hope my story encourages you to take a moment to think before you say something that could possibly cause harm to others. Get to know your coworkers for who they are, and realize we are all one big human family, and that everyone deserves respect and love.”