

TOM JOHNSON: MODERN CAREER WARRIOR ***@ AnneMarieSegal.com***

THOMAS (TOM) JOHNSON is our **Modern Career Warrior** for March 2020. This article is part of a [series of mid-career retrospective interviews](#) featuring inspiring and innovative professionals at [AnneMarieSegal.com](#).



My interview with Tom spans his “two careers” at The Clorox Company, his current semi-retirement as a yoga instructor in Fairfield County, Connecticut and his ideas for the future.

In Tom’s early career days, he was constantly on guard about his identity and knew that he missed a lot of opportunities as a result. Upon being offered a plum ex-pat assignment in London, he finally decided it was time to tell his boss he was not a single guy (as many at the company assumed) but in a long-term, committed relationship with his partner, Bruce.

That was in 1995. There were no policies, playbooks or packages for same-sex couples, so Tom was treading new ground. Yet Clorox believed in him and came through for him. Tom stayed at the company another 22 years and became one of the leaders in the movement across Corporate America for greater diversity and acceptance of LGBTQ employees. This is his story.

Read the full interview online at AnneMarieSegal.com/mcw-tom-johnson.

AMS: When I met you, you had just started teaching my Sunday morning yoga class, taking us through warrior poses, downward-facing dogs and the like. I had no idea that you were a veteran corporate executive, let alone one with such a robust career. Although I must admit a certain intensity was evident at our first meeting, even in that setting.



TDJ: I am definitely driven, and that's probably something I will never retire from. My husband says I am working just as hard as I ever worked [as an executive] at Clorox. Although my work today is not as stressful. I am driven by internal intensity, not external demands.

AMS: I could be biased by my own love of yoga, but should we use it as a lens to view your career? We could start with your perspective 25 years ago, when you took (rather than taught) your first yoga class.

TDJ: Yoga is definitely a key part of my daily life. It has helped me make some courageous choices and keeps me centered, which in turn fueled my professional development.

AMS: And you have already shared with me some of the highlights and challenges of your personal story, as it was featured in *Out and Equal at Work: From the Closet to the Corner Office*. Did yoga help you come to a better place in your life and career, where you could live more authentically?

TDJ: Well, I didn't take my first yoga class until after I got to London, so I was already on the path to the life I have today. Yoga helped keep me on the path.

AMS: So where should we start to unpack your story?

TDJ: Well, the guiding narrative of my early career began well before I took my very first job and stems from my childhood in Rochester, Michigan.

AMS: You mean themes such as these from your early life, as you told them in the book?

"I was the sixth of seven children raised in a working-class family of devout Catholics..."

"[M]y father ruled the house without debate, discussion or exception."

"Growing up, our family never had conversations about sexual orientation. However, I understood at an early age that anyone who did not fit a conventional gender profile was not acceptable in my family or my community."

"[I] felt like I was the only gay person in the whole state of Michigan."

TDJ: Yes. Life was very different back then, as some of us still remember and (thankfully) much of the current generation cannot even begin to imagine. It wasn't until I moved to Boston after college that I finally began the process of accepting who I am.

AMS: How did that change come about?

TDJ: The major shift in my life started when I met Bruce, who became my partner and later my husband.

AMS: What did that change look like?

TDJ: Coming out of the closet?

AMS: Yes, if that's the best term to use.

TDJ: Well, we still don't seem to have a better one. Bruce helped me tremendously. He saw the real me, and I finally felt loved and accepted. It was incredibly liberating.

AMS: And then you started telling other people?

TDJ: The whole coming out process happens in stages. It's not a "one and done" conversation.

AMS: So what happened next?

TDJ: Shortly after we met, I was offered a role in San Francisco, and Bruce decided to join me. We had only intended to be there a few years before returning to the Northeast, but we both found our initial footing in our careers and, well, it was sunny California.

AMS: What were your own career plans at that point?

TDJ: I didn't have an overarching plan. When I was in my early days at Clorox, I remember thinking, "If I just make it to manager, that would be awesome." I never imagined that one day I would become a Vice President and considered as a potential candidate for CFO.

AMS: But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

TDJ: [Smiles.] Yes, we are.

AMS: Let's talk about London.

TDJ: Right. I had been offered other expat roles that I didn't take, but this time I was chosen for a key assignment and asked to move to London. This was one I really wanted.

AMS: What was the role?

TDJ: The title was Finance Manager, and I would be co-leading business development in Central Europe and Middle East. Working in Hungary, Poland, Russia, Saudi Arabia... all out of London.

AMS: Exciting.

TDJ: It was exciting especially for someone who had, at that point, traveled very little outside of the U.S. But it also created a dilemma. I wasn't going to go to London without Bruce. And my boss didn't know I was in a relationship.

AMS: You hadn't told them yet.

TDJ: This was 1995. There was absolutely no indication that coming out would be good for my career. There were no policies protecting LGBTQ employees, no resources available and no LGBTQ employees in leadership roles. If I wanted to advance in my career, it seemed like the safest option was to stay in the closet.

AMS: But the London opportunity was too good to pass up.

TDJ: Yep. They were very keen on me going, but they thought they were sending a single guy. I decided it was finally time to tell my boss about my partner, Bruce.

AMS: And?

TDJ: To my surprise and his unending credit, my boss was extremely supportive. Working with human resources, he created an ex-pat package that enabled us to accept the assignment.

AMS: So that's how you "came out" at work? Happy ending?

TDJ: Well, there's more to it than that. I was finally out in the Oakland HQ and then in London. My boss even called ahead to the London management team and paved the way for me to have a successful transition.

But I also started traveling across Central Europe and to the Middle East, meeting with business partners. All while working in the consumer goods industry, which was notoriously conservative at the time.



AMS: Lots of levels and different audiences. What did you tell people when you met with them?

TDJ: At the time, it was more important for me to accomplish what I had set out to do for Clorox than be out and open with every single person I met. I was constantly traveling and also launching partnerships, like the one we developed with Henkel Corporation in Central Europe. There were some uncomfortable situations, but I managed. If it did get to a point where people asked if I was married, I would be transparent.

AMS: Even in Saudi Arabia?

TDJ: Well, that was the exception. In Saudi Arabia, usually they asked if I had a wife, I would say I did not and that would be the end of the conversation. But one partner in Saudi Arabia kept pushing me after seeing I was wearing a ring from my 10th anniversary with Bruce. He kept asking: "Why do you have a ring"? I kept deflecting and managed to get out of it somehow.

AMS: And Bruce? How did he handle the move to London?

TDJ: It was pretty tough on Bruce. The plan was for him to travel Europe and work on writing a book, getting his tourist visa renewed periodically. But he is of Italian descent and was subject to

profiling and detained whenever we traveled back to the UK. And in less than three months, as we were coming back from Vienna at Christmas, he was effectively deported.

AMS: What did you do?

TDJ: We happened to have a friend and neighbor who was the head of International HR at Clorox. Bruce went back to stay with him when he was deported, because our apartment was rented out. Our friend got an attorney and found a way to sort it out.

Bruce became a student in the UK and got his bachelor's degree from Richmond University (the American International University) just outside of London.

AMS: That's a great way to turn it around.

TDJ: Yes, it worked out. Now he has a master's degree as well, and he has published a book.

AMS: Europe was an inspiration for the writing after all?

TDJ: Yes, his book is called *When Stars Align*,¹ and it is based on a true story of the last Italian prince that he originally read in *The Guardian* when we lived in London.

AMS: That's amazing. You must be very proud of him as well.

TDJ: He's an awesome writer and storyteller, and I think we are a great team.

AMS: And your family? In *Out and Equal*, you mentioned that you came out to your brother and sisters first, which went well. And then your parents.

TDJ: Which did not go as well, at least at first.

AMS: How did you tell them?

TDJ: A few years before I came out at Clorox, I wrote my parents a letter, so they had a chance to react to the news in their own way, on their own time.

AMS: Did they know anything about Bruce? Anything at all?

TDJ: They knew we were living in the same apartment. They thought he was my roommate.

AMS: How did it go from there?

TDJ: They stopped their annual visits to see me in San Francisco, and I visited them but without Bruce. During those visits, I would continue to mention Bruce in our conversations, but they were clearly uncomfortable talking about him or us.

AMS: They were processing the news.

TDJ: Yes. I later realized that when we come out to our parents, we can inadvertently put them in the closet as well. They have to go through their own process of becoming comfortable with their own and others' reactions. Although I didn't know it at the time, they were coming to terms with this new information and coming out to their friends and community as parents of a gay son, which wasn't easy for them either.

AMS: But you did say that you became close with your parents again later.

TDJ: Yes, a full six years after I came out, there was a turning point. I was visiting them and my brothers and sisters, who had all moved to Florida by then. My father told us that for their 50th wedding anniversary, they wanted to take all of us on a cruise. And he specifically told me that he wanted to invite Bruce.

AMS: What a huge step.

TDJ: He became a supporter and protector for Bruce and me after that, and my mom became a vocal LGBTQ advocate.



AMS: Amazing. What a transformation.

TDJ: It's something I never could have imagined.

AMS: Did you have a positive reception at the office as well? Did it take people some time?

TDJ: Funny enough, many people had a very positive response. One of my direct reports told me she was actually relieved. She said she always felt like I was hiding something, but she didn't know what it was.

AMS: How did you react to that?

TDJ: She was absolutely right, of course. I felt it too. I *was* hiding something.

AMS: Which affected your ability to lead your teams.

TDJ: Absolutely. It was like I had two careers at Clorox. Before I came out and after.

AMS: Can you give me an example?

TDJ: There are tons of examples. Before I came out, it was very painful. I was always on guard, feeling that I might be exposing myself. For example, in my FP&A (financial planning and analysis) role, I was working with sales and marketing on brainstorming sessions.

Here I was, a guy who was well-versed in cleaning products and had a very different point of view. I could see marketing opportunities beyond our invariable target of 35 to 55-year-old women, but I was afraid to chime in. I lost a lot of opportunities, and Clorox did too.

AMS: A clear case of “before and after.”

TDJ: Yes. And here’s another example. As I progressed to more senior roles, prior to coming out, I would be asked to present progress on strategic initiatives and progress against plans. I distinctly remember presentations where I had to sit at the end of a long table to present, and I was a freaking nervous wreck for fear of inadvertently exposing my true identity.



AMS: And then?

TDJ: Two things. Coming out enabled me to feel less fearful and more authentic and confident. Also, as we talked about at the beginning of our conversation, yoga was transformative for my public speaking.

AMS: I knew we would turn back to yoga!

TDJ: [Laughs.] Yes. You asked about my first yoga class, which was pretty low key. We didn't even have mats and were practicing in jeans at a gym nearby the place we were living in London. Basically, we just took off our shoes and started doing yoga.

Shortly after that, I was transferred back to San Francisco. Mindful Body was right around the corner from where we lived, so I started going there. I got into Bikram Yoga and practicing in a heated room, later I went on some retreats with Baron Baptiste (who does hot power yoga) and now do a lot of vinyasa. Yoga helps me leave the stress of the day behind, and I have been practicing ever since that first class at the gym.

AMS: Was it the combination of breathing and movement that helped your public speaking?

TDJ: Right. One thing I learned was how deep belly breathing could help me relax. I also took a communications class at Berkeley extension, taught by a former actor, which helped me with the skill gap in presenting.

At the time, they didn't do a lot of work around presentation skills for finance people. I don't know why they didn't teach this stuff in high school, honestly!

AMS: Well, I have seen you flawlessly lead a yoga class. You are 100% fluid and present in the moment. I would never have thought you had trouble getting up in front of people.

TDJ: I got a lot of experience with public speaking at Clorox over the years, especially when I became Chief Accounting Officer. I would make presentations to the board or sometimes hundreds of people at the company.

AMS: What was that like?

TDJ: I was literally out on stage (pun intended). It was cathartic, and the positive feedback was very affirming. During one presentation, the COO even texted me: "You are a hell of a lot better than I thought you would be!"

AMS: A backhanded compliment.

TDJ: [Laughs again.] Yes, you can see it that way. But honestly, I got a lot of support from senior management, and Clorox continued to grow in its diversity efforts over the years.

AMS: Did you ever feel like a token?

TDJ: Not at Clorox, no. They were very "trainable," if you want to put it that way. They just needed to learn how to do it.

AMS: And now they are seen as a diversity and inclusion leader among corporations, is that right? How did that progression happen?

TDJ: Don Knauss, who became CEO in 2006, was a big champion of the change. He launched five diversity networks at Clorox: Hispanic, African American, Asian, LGBTQ and women.

Benno Dorer, the current CEO, has taken these efforts to a new level and leveraged them to really drive innovation and business results.

I raised my hand to lead the initial LGBTQ network. It was fascinating to participate. At our first meeting, I was unsure who, if anyone, would attend. Turns out, we had around 25 people show up. I wanted to make it as safe as possible, so we met in a room with no windows. Things have come a long way since then.

AMS: Really! How things have changed.

TDJ: That's absolutely right. The group grew organically, as people started to come out to me, sometimes privately, afterward. It's like we were hearing Harvey Milk's words of nearly 30 years earlier, "come out, come out, wherever you are..."

I am amazed at how different it is today. While there is still a lot of equality work to do, I can't help but reflect on how much has changed in a relatively short time.

AMS: It sounds like you are really bullish on the role corporations can play in advancing the conversation about diversity and inclusion.



TDJ: That's true. People get really down on corporations, but they are doing some really incredible work that's not being done by the government or anyone else. It's often in the corporate environment that conversations about diversity and inclusion happen. Employees then bring these conversations back to their families and communities with a different perspective. And that's how social change happens.

AMS: And you also were on the board of Out & Equal, a national non-profit organization.

TDJ: Right. O&E provided services and held annual summits aimed at driving workplace equality for LGBTQ employees. The summits attracted thousands of people. I was frankly blown away by the quality of the summit content and presenters.

I also loved using the corporate platform to drive LGBTQ equality inside and outside the company. For example, during Pride Month² each year, the ERG (employee resource group) brought people in to tell their stories. We opened a lot of eyes. For some people, that was the only place they came in contact with members of the LGBTQ community.

AMS: Knowing the company is committed, not just delivering platitudes, makes for some very loyal employees as well.

TDJ: Yes, as well-trained finance people, we also started to push diversity and inclusion from a business perspective. It was the late 90s, and we were beginning to lose talent to technology companies (with more progressive policies) that were starting to sprout up in the Bay Area.

AMS: I love the image of you with the Clorox products. You look very happy and relaxed, in your element. That said, this photograph is from almost twenty years ago!

As we first met for our interview in early February 2020, the coronavirus hadn't really taken hold in the U.S. But as this article is coming out, when people think of Clorox products, they are also thinking about its effectiveness in disinfecting³ their homes and offices from the virus.

TDJ: The uncertainty of this virus is sadly reminiscent of the early days of the AIDS crisis, in both the uncertainty of who might be infected and the lack of good treatment options for those who become sick. But it's also different, as this virus is global and more easily transmittable.

It's pretty awful right now, but it's also a good reminder of how connected we truly are on this planet. It's heartening to see the good coming out in communities and people helping one another. I'm hopeful that the need for such heightened protective measures will be short-lived.

AMS: It's also affecting your yoga teaching, as studios and gyms are closing or suspending classes in Fairfield County as in other parts of the U.S.

TDJ: Yes, I was disinfecting yoga blocks a few weeks ago, and now all of the classes are suspended indefinitely.

AMS: So, if we speak about your teaching career (aside from the after-effects of the virus for a moment), you are teaching seven classes a week at various locations.

TDJ: Yes, I teach vinyasa and a few beginners series.

[interview continues on next page]



AMS: What was it like to move from Chief Accounting Officer to yoga teacher? You were telling me that you “retired,” but it sounds like you are still pretty busy!

TDJ: One of the things I always enjoyed in my corporate career was helping businesses and individuals accomplish their goals. I get the same enjoyment out of my yoga career. In particular, I love helping people get started in yoga and enjoy seeing the transformation it can bring to individuals and to the communities in which they live.

AMS: And is this what you envision as retirement? Is there another chapter after this one?

TDJ: I essentially retired from a 60-hour work week and two-hour daily commute. I am wary that many roles in the corporate sector can easily evolve back into that.

AMS: Is that why you didn’t aggressively pursue the CFO role at Clorox?

TDJ: There were a lot of things I needed to do to qualify myself to advance to CFO, and there were a lot of responsibilities in the role that frankly weren’t that interesting to me. I didn’t want to be in front of the board and investors all the time, with many days on the road and daylong parades of presenters in management meetings.

AMS: So again, it boils down to your goals and priorities.

TDJ: Yes. What really motivated me was helping people develop themselves, and I also liked working with cross-functional teams to operate the business.

AMS: How did that look from a practical perspective?

TDJ: Well, I was able to have an awesome 29-year career with a single company by moving roles frequently and taking on new challenges. This was fueled in part by business need and in part by my natural curiosity and desire to learn.

AMS: So you took pains to create a career trajectory that brought those challenges.

TDJ: Yes, as I progressed, I stayed in roles longer and wasn’t facing as many new challenges year after year, in terms of my official job description. To keep things interesting, I looked for

other ways contribute. This included D&I work, but also M&A work and other projects. Overall, it helped me stay engaged while managing the aspects of my job that became more routine. At the same time, I began delegating more, thereby challenging my direct reports.

AMS: They were very fortunate to have you. Yet at some point, it was time to move on.

TDJ: It was.

AMS: What were your last few days of the company like? How did they take the news?

TDJ: Clorox has a well-honed succession planning process, so we had a clear plan for my replacement. I communicated my intention to retire at age 55 and was looking forward to moving back to the East Coast and spending more time with my family.

AMS: And did that happen?

TDJ: Well, it did happen in part. I moved back East, and I did get to spend more time with my family. But I didn't end up fully retiring for another year and a half.

AMS: You essentially commuted from Connecticut?

TDJ: I did.

AMS: Did you consider keeping your apartment in San Francisco?

TDJ: San Francisco was lovely in a lot of ways, but the community is very transient, probably due to the prevalence of tech companies. We really wanted to settle into our new community.

AMS: Have you been able to do that?

TDJ: Somewhat. Bruce and I like to have fewer deep relationships rather than many "friends" who are essentially acquaintances. We often are invited to dinners and parties, but even after a few years, we still feel like we are settling in. Yoga has helped us again in that respect, as we try to create a community here.

AMS: Did you actually retire to teach yoga, or did that occur to you afterwards?

TDJ: The first year of my retirement was focused around family. My mom was diagnosed with dementia, and I was able to enjoy time with her and my family unencumbered by work [before she passed away in 2017].

In 2018, I started yoga teacher training at Jaté Yoga in Rowayton. It wasn't my intention to teach. I simply wanted to learn more about anatomy and the history and philosophy of yoga. But the deeper I got into my studies, the more apparent it became that as a teacher I could continue to work with others on personal transformation and help them enjoy life and accomplish their goals.



AMS: Do you miss anything about life as a corporate executive?

TDJ: I miss the people and sometimes the intellectual stimulation, challenge and the “chase.” But I did that for 35 years, and I think it was enough. The next chapter is about pursuing things in life for which I truly have passion or interest, like teaching yoga, traveling and giving back to the community. I’d consider another corporate or non-profit leadership role, but it would have to be something for which I have a lot of passion.

AMS: Do you still get calls from recruiters? And, if so, what do you tell them?

TDJ: I say that I have no interest in roles like that ones I have already had. It would be fun to be CFO and manage a team at a smaller company. One that might grow to a point where it would be acquired by Clorox, for example.

AMS: In the meantime, you’ll just take it one adventure at a time.

TDJ: Like I always have. Yes, I absolutely will.

Launched in January 2020, **MODERN CAREER WARRIORS** is a bi-monthly series on **AnneMarieSegal.com** that explores the lives of professionals leading robust, resilient and multi-dimensional careers.

DEPTH, COURAGE AND INTENSITY radiate from these Modern Career Warriors, who defy the odds and define their own paths. While they may, like the rest of us, feel side-lined or even defeated at times, their inner drive keeps driving them to their personal best and inspires others to do the same.

The full version of this interview is available at AnneMarieSegal.com/mcw-tom-johnson.





Anne Marie Segal, founder of Segal Coaching LLC, is an executive coach, resume writer and author of two well-received books on interviewing and career development. She served as a corporate attorney for 15 years, including roles at White & Case LLP and a prominent hedge and private equity fund manager, before launching her coaching practice.

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¹ <https://www.amazon.com/When-Stars-Align-Bruce-Genaro/dp/0578483122>

² <https://www.bizjournals.com/sanfrancisco/print-edition/2015/06/12/corporate-pride-award-clorox-makes-LGBTQ-inclusion.html>

³ https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2020-03/documents/sars-cov-2-list_03-03-2020.pdf