FIVE QUESTIONS

Devoted to justice, Miami

Elizabeth F. Schwartz is an attorney and a Miami Fellow being honored by the Miami-Dade Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce, www.gogaymiami.com, at its annual gala on March 23.

Q: What is the Miami Fellows Initiative?

A: It's a two-year-long leadership initiative funded by the John S, and James L. Knight Foundation and run by the Dade Community Foundation in which 18 emerging leaders from different parts of the Miami-Dade community get to enhance their skills through a mentoring program, experiential learning. The idea is that we all only know the Miami that we are a part of. But there are many other Miamis that

tions. So we try to get out of our dayto-day experiences and learn about others. I've been blessed with an incredible mentor, [School Board member] Evelyn

make contribu-



Greer. We're so uncannily, positively connected. She's smart and funny and pushes me — that is such a privilege. To become a fellow is an application process. For more information, go to www.miamifellows.org.

Q: What communities have you learned about?

A: The Haitian community has been a real revelation to me. I didn't know much about it. It was wonderful to celebrate it. Then we learned about all the injustices, the immigration policies. I thought I knew the Cuban community and the black community, but even those, you get deeper into them. Then you go into Overtown and see the work being done on the Lyric Theater and the

work being done to prevent people from being displaced by gentrification - that's not what you learn from being a gay activist and having black friends.

Q: How did you decide to spe cialize in gay family law?

A: I work from the heart. I got involved in this area of law because I saw the injustices happening. I feel the obligation to educate people that the law doesn't acknowledge their relationship or even their relationship to a nonbiological child. If a woman, for example, hasn't adopted her partner's child which is illegal for any homosexual in Florida - she has no legal claim.

I feel very privileged. I come from a family that was very warm and accepting when I came out. I was fortunate not to go through what many others have. I have my own practice [www.sobelaw.com] and can work with my community to help them protect themselves. My parents are major activists in the Jewish community. So I come from a place of commitment to social justice. I've taken that and turned it into a missiondriven career. If the gay and lesbian community doesn't defend itself, no one will. Homophobia is one of those prejudices that is still accepted.

Q. Can you tell us about the injustices?

A. I have seen so many horror stories. Frank and Rob were about to celebrate their 40th anniversary, and their present was going to be an estate plan. But Rob died, and Rob's family swooped in and kicked Frank out of the house. That's why I speak to people about planning, even though they may be young and have few assets. Talking 'til I'm blue in the face is probably why the chamber is recognizing me.

Q: Why stay in Miami? A: I was born here. I'm extremely close to my family. This is home. I live in Miami because it pulsates. It is the most alive place in the country. We are not one people, not one note. This community is vibrating with the hopes of so many people who have come here to make a better life. We have a lot of work to do. It's the best that the country has to offer in terms of true diversity.

Editorial Board member Susana Barciela prepared this report.