

Out & Equal's summit highlights Bank of America's long journey for LGBT advancement (Video)

By Mark Calvey

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[Bank of America](#) sent more than 150 employees to Out & Equal's Workplace Summit this week in San Francisco, accounting for 5 percent of the event's record attendance.

For some, the bank's presence was a time for reflection on a journey that has taken place over three decades for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender employees. The summit's job fair, filled with [recruiters from a broad range of employers](#), was striking.

Charlotte-based Bank of America was eager to tout this week that its LGBT Pride employee resource group has 30 chapters and 5,800 members worldwide.

The bank pioneered domestic partner benefits and expanded its non-discrimination policy to include sexual orientation in the 1990s. More recently, California's largest bank expanded its benefits program to include medically necessary treatments for transgender employees.

I had the opportunity this week to speak with BofA employee [Dave Studach](#), a gay man who joined the bank in 1980 as an executive secretary in the bank's traveler's cheque unit in San Francisco. He recalled the days when the bank's gay employee group was called The Lunch Group, an informal gathering of gay employees who met regularly in the 1980s to discuss workplace issues.

Those lunches were held long before official policies were expanded to include LGBT, so I asked him what the group's ambitions were in those days.

"We wanted acceptance in the workplace. We wanted it to be ok to use the words 'gay' and 'AIDS' at work," recalled Studach, who is now a vice president for the bank's consultant systems and software operations in San Francisco.

Studach said [Kathi Burke](#), the bank's senior executive for human resources at the time, was an important champion for LGBT advances at BofA, and through her professional network, for the broader Bay Area business community.



Bank of America employees, sporting red shirts emblazoned with the bank's name, were pleased that Bank of America accounted for 5 percent of the record attendance at Out & Equal's Workplace Summit in San Francisco.

"Kathi was not afraid of engaging people. We had so many gay people as employees that we couldn't ignore them," Studach told me.

"A turning point was the unveiling of the bank's panel in the AIDS Memorial Quilt at our Concord Technology Center in 1994," Studach said, crying as he shared his powerful memory of that day. "There were four floors of employees watching the ceremony in the atrium.

"That event broke down barriers," Studach said. "It became okay to talk about AIDS at work."

The ceremony, organized by BofA employee [Tom Slimak](#), also included speeches by Burke and the bank's then-Vice-Chairman [Marty Stein](#) as well as a letter sent in support of the event by then-CEO [Dick Rosenberg](#). Rosenberg was traveling in Europe at the time. A video of BofA's 1994 ceremony can be seen with this story.

By 1996, Burke's leadership on gay issues was [the focus of a San Francisco Business Times front-page story](#). My story discussed Burke's participation in the San Francisco AIDS Walk and the record level of corporate support the fundraiser received that year.

"For people who are very involved in the fight against AIDS, (the corporate involvement) is well known.

But from a broader perspective it's the best kept secret, and it shouldn't be," Burke said in 1996, also sharing that her sister and brother-in-law, a hemophiliac, had died of AIDS. "As people in the bank learned of my experience, so many reached out to me to share how they and their friends and family have been touched by AIDS.

"It made me realize that if we don't talk about it, we don't allow others to help cope with our grief and give each other hope," Burke said in that 1996 interview.

Bank of America's advances on LGBT issues took another leap forward with the 1998 merger with Charlotte-based NationsBank, whose CEO [Hugh McColl](#) was [quick to embrace domestic partner benefits](#) for the combined bank's gay employees in a press conference announcing the merger. BofA insiders say some of the cultural attitudes toward LGBT people took longer for some employees across the country to embrace.

But Bank of America's advances on LGBT issues in the workplace has influenced others. [Julie Hogan](#), vice president of North America services at [NCR](#) (NYSE: NCR), said she first encountered resistance as a gay executive at [Xerox](#) (NYSE: XRX) when the company transferred her to Charlotte in the mid-1990s.

Before her arrival, some of her colleagues told management that a lesbian wasn't the "right fit" for the Carolinas, she recalled this week on an Out & Equal panel, "Where are the Out LGBT Executives." After the panel, Hogan told me times have changed in Charlotte, where Bank of America, [Wells Fargo](#) (NYSE: WFC) and the city's universities — along with a steady flow of newcomers — have shifted attitudes.

Now many companies have embraced LGBT allies within their workforces to help advance LGBT issues.

Count me among those who weren't aware of how widespread the ally initiative has become.

Over coffee this week, BofA (NYSE: BAC) spokeswoman [Colleen Haggerty](#), an LGBT ally attending the Out & Equal summit, said, "I wasn't aware of the formal LGBT Ally movement, but I'm glad Bank of America has 12,000 of them."



When Bank of America held a special ceremony in Concord, Calif. in October 1994 to commemorate the company's panel in the Names Project's AIDS Memorial Quilt, it marked a turning point in the acceptance of LGBT employees and those suffering from AIDS. The event was vocally supported by then-CEO Dick Rosenberg and other senior executives, something that would have been unusual for corporate leaders at the time. The video was provided courtesy of Bank of America.

<http://www.bizjournals.com/phoenix/news/2014/11/10/bank-of-america-lgbt-employees-diversity-bac.html>