

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

How BofA came Out & Equal

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

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.

BofA 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 to

include medically necessary treatments for transgender employees.

I had the opportunity this month to speak with BofA employee Dave Studach, a gay man who joined the bank in 1980 as an executive secretary 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.

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

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.

"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 OK to talk about AIDS at work."

The ceremony, organized by BofA employee Tom Sliimak, 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, who was traveling.

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 then.

Bank of America's advances on LGBT issues took another leap forward with the 1998 merger with Charlotte-based NationsBank, whose CEO Hugh McGill was quick to embrace domestic partner benefits for the combined bank's gay employees. Cultural attitudes toward LGBT people took longer for some employees across the country to embrace.

Bank of America's advances on LGBT issues in the workplace have influenced others. Julie Hogan, vice president of North America services at NCR, said she first encountered resistance when Xerox 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 and Wells Fargo helped shift 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: BofA, for instance, has 12,000 of them.

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