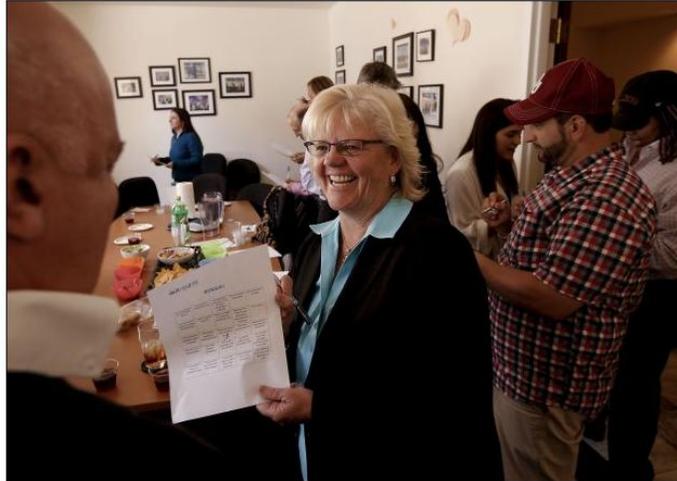


Selisse Berry's fight for the rights of LGBT employees

By Meredith May

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Selisse Berry, founder of Out & Equal Workplace Advocates, has worked with more than 500 companies, such as Clorox, Ford and Walmart, to help create inclusive and equal workplaces for



Selisse Berry is founder and CEO of a nonprofit dedicated to LGBT employee rights. Photo: Michael Short, The Chronicle



Berry has been bringing her efforts for equality overseas, organizing summits in London and India.



Selisse Berry the founder of Out & Equal Workplace Advocates, has her photo taken at their financial district office on Thursday May 29, 2014, in San Francisco, Calif. Photo: Michael Macor,



Selisse Berry, founder and CEO of Out & Equal Workplace Advocates which is the world's largest nonprofit dedicated to ensuring equality and respect in the workplace for LGBT employees, poses for a portrait at her home in Berkeley, CA, Friday May 30, 2014. Photo: Michael Short, The Chronicle



Selisse Berry the founder of Out & Equal Workplace Advocates, is presented with a gift by her staff during their monthly "Tea & Cake" get together at their financial district office on Thursday May 29, 2014, in San Francisco, Calif. Photo: Michael Macor, The Chronicle | [Buy this photo](#)

When [Selisse Berry](#) began advocating for equal treatment of gays in the workplace, the reception was more than chilly. It was frozen.

She walked into conference rooms where forced attendees sat with their arms folded and Bibles on their laps. They tripped over the word, "le-le-le-lesbian."

It was the early 1990s, when just 5 percent of American companies had policies forbidding discrimination based on an employee's sexual orientation.

"I'd have employees close their eyes and imagine the world reversed ... where every movie, every book, every TV commercial, affirmed only same-sex relationships," said Berry, 58. "Then I'd ask them to try to describe how that made them feel."

Two decades later, the San Francisco-based nonprofit that Berry started, [Out & Equal Workplace Advocates](#), has helped more than 500 multinational companies, from Clorox to Ford to [Walmart](#), reinvent themselves into welcoming workplaces with domestic partner health and family leave benefits, antidiscrimination policies and diversity training.

Although protecting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender workers from harassment is not federally required, 21 states have written their own protections into state law. And today, 91 percent of Fortune 500 companies include sexual orientation in their nondiscrimination policies, up from 61 percent in 2002, according to the [Human Rights Campaign](#).

"Selisse has really carved out a niche in the equality movement by focusing on workplace equality," said [Tom Johnson](#), Clorox's vice president of finance, global business services. "HRC is focused on legislation, GLAAD is focused on the media, and Selisse is the go-to person for employment issues."

Far from finished

But while Berry has led an overhaul of American office culture, she says her work is nowhere near finished. Companies now want her help protecting workers in overseas offices, located in countries such as Uganda, India and Russia that are openly hostile to and even outlawing homosexuality.

And there's still a pink closet in the highest ranks of corporate America: There is only a handful of openly gay chief executives at the nation's 1,000 biggest companies.

In addition to getting policies in place, a big part of Berry's advocacy is encouraging business leaders to come out, so that others lower on the masthead may feel safe to follow.

"There are emotional and financial benefits to being authentic," said Berry, in her Berkeley living room decorated with a colorful Klimt rug and bright paintings.

"If you are putting all your energy into hiding, into changing pronouns, you are actually not working at full capacity, and that hurts the company's bottom line," said Berry, who anthologized the coming-out stories of LGBT executives from Disney, Clorox, Hewlett-Packard, Xerox, Intuit and others into a self-published 2012 book, "Out and Equal at Work: From Closet to [Corner Office](#)."

In her talks before the 2,500 who show up annually for her [Out & Equal Workplace Summit](#), Berry argues that closeted workers are a wasted resource - people whose ideas could steer a company to better market to LGBT consumers, whose disposable incomes skew higher than average.

To win people over to her side, Berry tells her own bumpy coming-out story.

Hoped to be minister

Growing up in the Bible Belt of Oklahoma, Berry had a strong grounding in the church, and was inspired to become a social worker. After graduating from the [University of Texas](#), she enrolled in the San Francisco Theological Seminary with plans of becoming a Presbyterian minister.

She landed in San Francisco right at the height of the women's movement, joined a women's spirituality group and stopped trying to "pray away" her crushes on women.

In the second year of seminary, she had an epiphany while cresting the hill on Divisadero overlooking the Castro. She remembered something a Unitarian minister had recently told her: "How do you plan to talk about love as a minister if you can't talk about who you love?"

Berry loved her life, and her new girlfriend - and she decided it was time to come out.

At the seminary, she formed a support group for like-minded women: Seminary Lesbians Under Theological Stress, (SLUTS), printed up T-shirts, and marched in the Pride Parade.

In 1990, Berry wrote a letter to her home church in Oklahoma, telling them she was a lesbian, and asking whether she should still continue down the path to ordination.

The church rejected her.

Berry was crushed, but not broken. She vowed to help other LGBT people whose careers were getting derailed by prejudice, going to work as the director of a [United Way](#) program called Building Bridges, which offered LGBT diversity training to nonprofits.

Corporate America

But many of the nonprofits she visited were progressive and welcoming to gay colleagues. Berry wanted to get into corporate America, so she started asking around: "Does anyone know any gay folks working for big companies?"

Two women from Silicon Valley answered Berry's call, and organized a brunch for gay tech workers. Two hundred people showed up.

"We realized there were all these disparate tiny gay groups here and there, one at Genentech, one at PacBell, one at Sun Microsystems. I started getting them all together."

Berry's fledgling network started getting her into Silicon Valley offices, at first just to dispel myths about homosexuality, AIDS and gender transition. Eventually those talks led to official nondiscrimination policies. When a shop floor worker at Ford changed genders, Berry helped the company understand the issues and provide support.

When Clorox executive Johnson needed help getting his company to embrace the new Clorox Pride employee resource group he started in 2006, he called Berry. He is now president of Out & Equal's board of directors.

"She shared her expertise and helped make sure we became more than a social group at work, that we evolved into an educational group that explained why it's important to be out and to have allies to create an equitable environment at work," said Johnson, who remained closeted for his first seven years on the job, concerned he would be ostracized.

With Berry's encouragement, Johnson enlisted his boss [Don Knauss](#) in 2008 to become the first Fortune 500 CEO to deliver a keynote address to the Out & Equal Workplace Summit.

Taking battle overseas

Now, Berry is going global. In 2012, she organized her first [Out & Equal Global LGBT Summit](#), in London, to address discrimination overseas.

"Progress is two steps forward, two steps back," Berry said. "There are some countries where gays can get married, others where they are imprisoned, and some places you can be killed."

In London, her keynote speaker was Anna Grodzka, the first openly transgender member of Poland's Parliament - and the third nationally elected transgender politician in the world. In Bangalore, India, Berry convened panels with members from IBM, Dell, Intuit, Reuters and Google to share their knowledge about protecting their overseas workers from homophobia.

Happy where she is

Although Berry never became a minister, in 2011 the U.S. Presbyterian church became the largest Christian denomination to allow gay clergy. It was a bittersweet victory for Berry, who watched the church in 2012 try to censure her good friend the Rev. Jane Spahr, for marrying gays and lesbians for the brief initial period it was legal in California in 2008 - including Berry and her partner, former Kodak executive [Cynthia Martin](#). (After a legal battle, same-sex marriage became legal again statewide in 2013.)

"I feel more effective where I am; honestly I'm soured by the way I've seen the church treat people," Berry said.

In a way, Berry already is ministering. She travels the world giving inspiring speeches about compassion, bravery and humankind, all in the name of social work.

Recently, at the LGBT Hungarian Business Forum in Budapest, Berry gave a keynote speech about workplace equality in which she introduced Cynthia as her "wife."

When it was time for the Q&A, all anyone wanted to discuss was Berry's use of "wife."

"They had not heard that language used before for LGBT couples," Berry said. "They were amazed and delighted to even consider they might one day be able to say the same thing."

<http://www.sfgate.com/default/article/Selisse-Berry-s-fight-for-the-rights-of-LGBT-5603193.php#page-2>