

Professional Resources

Article

Out & Equal Workplace Summit: Levi's® teams up with White Knot for Equality

By Susan Jordan

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Out and Equal held its Northeast Regional Workplace Summit on April 14 2011 at the Rochester Riverside Convention Center, hosted by Out & Equal Finger Lakes and Metro NY, Philadelphia and Washington D.C. Affiliate.

LGBT workplace equality is great for employees and for business, Out & Equal says. Summit attendees will receive actionable ideas to engage LGBT employees, allies, and management and make a difference in the workplace.

National leaders delivered 16 workshops, including coming out to clients, bullying from playground to workplace, LGBT healthcare equality and religion in the workplace. Rochester and the Finger Lakes region was chosen for this summit since 32 regional employers have achieved the highest rating for Best Places to Work for LGBT Equality from the Human Rights Campaign.

The Summit opened with a State of the LGBT Workplace address by Selisse Berry, founder and executive director of Out & Equal Workplace Advocates in San Francisco. The keynote address will be given by Enrique Atienza, vice president of Levi's and Docker's Retail Stores and Operations, Americas.

As part of its ongoing commitment to equality, the Levi's® brand has once again partnered with White Knot for Equality in support of same-sex marriage. White Knot for Equality is a non-profit organization dedicated to achieving equal rights for the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) population.

In solidarity with White Knot's mission, Levi's® expanded on its existing partnership with White Knot by displaying white ribbons in all Levi's® stores nationwide during May and June of 2010. As part of the program, mannequins were outfitted with white ribbons, a symbol that combines two traditional signs of marriage – white and tying the



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knot. To further support the program, all stores had a limited supply of white ribbons for employees and customers who wanted to show their support for equality.

“Our company believes deeply in promoting equal rights and fighting for social justice. We have a rich history of standing up for the rights of every citizen including those in the LGBT community,” said Robert Hanson, President, Levi Strauss Americas. “The white knot is a powerful symbol for individuals who want to demonstrate their belief in equality and we are proud to support the important work of the White Knot organization.”

“We are proud to once again partner with Levi’s®, a company with a long history of supporting equality and social justice,” said White Knot founder, Frank Voci. “In a time when the issue may not be top of mind for most, this program brings much needed visibility across the nation to our continued struggle for equality.”

For more than 50 years, Levi Strauss & Co. has been a leader in the fight for equal rights on many fronts, including racial, gender, sexual and economic. In the 1940s, Levi Strauss & Co. integrated their sewing plants in the south, decades before racial integration was required by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In 1992 Levi Strauss & Co. was the first Fortune 500 company to offer health benefits to domestic partners and in 2003 the company was recognized for including gender identity as a protected class in its corporate non-discrimination policies. The company’s latest efforts in bringing awareness to the continued struggle for equality include its outspoken support of the “No on Prop 8” campaign in California in 2008. Levi’s Strauss & Co. aims to influence how people around the world perceive and treat others in an effort to help create a more diverse and equitable society.

For more information about the Levi’s® brand, its products and stores, please visit www.levi.com.

About White Knot for Equality

Founded in 2008, White Knot for Equality is a 501-c(3) non-profit corporation with a mission to bring widespread awareness to the importance of marriage equality and overall equality for LGBTQ people. White Knot helps people to engage in the conversations necessary to affect change, and to visibly show the true support equality has. The White Knot takes two traditional symbols of marriage — white and tying the knot — and combines them to create a simple universal symbol for equality. White Knots are now worn by supporters in all 50 states and 30 other countries. For more information visit www.whiteknot.org.

The Summit included the following workshops:

Community

Spirituality, Values and the Workplace Inspiritual, Rochester; Bullying: From the Playground to the Workplace GLSEN, Rochester ; Building a Roadmap for Business Effectiveness Jennifer Brown Consulting, New

York ; Assessing & Improving Your Organization's LGBT Climate HRC Foundation, Washington DC, Tax Equity for LGBT Couples.

Transgender Inclusion

Being Transgender in the Workplace in a Binary World. Xerox, Laurel MD, Kodak Rochester NY; Health Benefits for Transgender Employees and the CEI, HRC Foundation, Washington DC.

Employee Resource Groups

Creating an LGBT Mentoring Program Johnson & Johnson, New Brunswick NJ; From marketing to outreach: How to make an ERG relevant Kimberly Clark, Atlanta GA; The care and feeding of straight allies at work: What LGBTs must know for successful inclusion PFLAG, Washington DC; Identifying, building and developing an LGBT pipeline of rising stars Ernst & Young, Pittsburgh.

Human Resource Management

Assessing and Improving Your Organization's LGBT Climate. Building a Roadmap for Business Effectiveness, Tracking GLBT Demographics in the Workplace Xerox Canada, Toronto; Professionals Healthcare Equality Index (HEI) – A framework for inclusive policies, benefits and patient care practices University of Rochester; Professionals Connecting our networks for greater success – locally and beyond Ernst & Young, Pittsburgh; HR Professionals Understanding and Managing LGBT issues in the workplace ITT, Rochester.

Sponsors for the regional summit are, at publication date: Constellation Brands Inc, Kodak, Excellus Blue Cross Blue Shield, Corning, Xerox, MetLife.

Additional information

For more information please contact Ralph Carter, event co-chair, Rochester, (585) 265-5904, fingertakes@outandequal.org; Stephen Gould, Out & Equal (national) San Francisco (415) 694-6506.

A talk with Enrique Atienza

Empty Closet: Can you tell us about The Levi Strauss & Co. Brand's White Knot Campaign in support of marriage equality?

Enrique Atienza: For two years, the Levi's® brand has partnered White Knot for Equality to raise awareness about the important issue of marriage equality. Every May, our Levi's® stores hand out white ribbons to employees and shoppers to show our support for the fight for marriage equality. The stores also use our best real estate – our retail windows – to educate consumers about this issue.

Levi Strauss was a pioneer of his time and deeply committed to the community in which his business

prospered. Over 155 years later, we strive to stay true to his pioneering spirit and embody the energy and events of our time. I'm proud to work for a company that has long advocated for equal rights for all and fought discrimination against the LGBT community -- not just with financial support, but with decisive, public action.

In 1992, we were the first Fortune 500 company to provide domestic partnership health benefits to the unmarried partners of our employees. That same year, we stopped funding the Boy Scouts because of their discriminatory policies. And, in the last several years, we stepped up to support equal rights in marriage -- we were the only company to sign onto an amicus brief to the CA Supreme Court in support of same-sex marriage. All-in-all, over the last ten years, we have donated more than \$1 million to organizations that address discrimination toward the LGBT community.

EC: Why do you feel that so many American corporations have instituted non-discrimination policies protecting LGBT workers? What prevents some companies from adopting such policies?

EA: First and foremost, more companies are developing and implementing non-discrimination policies because it's the right thing to do. Corporations are also learning that ending discrimination in the workplace makes good business sense. The success of a business depends on the ability to recruit and retain the best employees in a global market for talent -- regardless of their gender, race or sexual preference. At Levi Strauss & Co., we believe that all of our employees should be treated equally and with the same respect.

EC: Do you think that even though supportive policies may be in place, corporations are providing enough diversity training for employees, in order to reduce both deliberate homophobic harassment and well-meaning ignorance of LGBT people's lives?

EA: I can only speak for Levi Strauss & Co. We work to incorporate our four values -- originality, empathy, integrity and courage -- into every part of our business. Because equality has been embedded into our heritage and culture, we do not conduct separate diversity trainings. Instead, we include equality and LGBT rights as part of all of our trainings, whether they are sexual harassment, code of ethics, or new employee trainings.

EC: What do you feel has been key in making advances for LGBT workers? What needs to be done in future?

EA: The real linchpin in driving advances for LGBT workers is that more corporations are developing and implementing non-discrimination policies in the workplace. In 1992, we were the first company to provide domestic partners benefits to our employees. Now, more than 50 percent of Fortune 500 companies offer this benefit.

We also need to continue to work together to encourage the federal government to pass legislation that promotes

equality, notably the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), the Domestic Partners Tax Equity and marriage equality legislation.

EC: Do you link homophobic prejudice with other forms of bias and discrimination?

EA: Unfortunately, prejudice exists in all forms of discrimination – racial, gender, sexual and economic. It's important for corporations to be engaged in the fight for equality on all fronts. Our efforts to bring equality extend well beyond our own workplace and are seen in our public policy advocacy, our media and advertising presence, our employee engagement in the community and through our grant making programs.

EC: Can you describe some personal experiences with any form of bias and discrimination, either in the workplace or elsewhere?

EA: I've never been discriminated at work so I have to go back to the time when my partner and I were looking for a venue for our wedding.

We contacted a place that we loved. Everything was going great – we were deep into discussion until I clearly stated that it was two men getting married. Shortly after that, I received a message from the venue letting me know that the date we were looking for had just been booked, even though we had a temporary blocked into it. When I asked about other available dates, we were told that every weekend for the balance of the year was booked. I had two options: let this impact my wedding plans with remorse and frustration or move on to somewhere else where we felt appreciated and embraced for who we were.

We choose the second – and found more venue options than we expected. We encountered truly remarkable people that helped us seal our love for each other forever in the wedding that we both have always imagined. Bottom line, while we need to continue to fight against discrimination, we also need to be in charge of our destinies and don't let anyone to ruin your ability to make choices. There are always choices.

EC: Do boycotts and other protests by conservative anti-gay organizations, including religious groups, really affect corporate policies?

EA: I can't speak for other companies, but at Levi Strauss & Co., we have strived to create policies that focus on equality for all citizens – whether it was segregating our factories years before it was required before law or being on the forefront of fighting the HIV/AIDS crisis. There are definitely times when we hear from people on both sides of debates who disagree with our positions. But we're fortunate to have a very strong history of standing up firmly on issues of our times – and we have leaders who have backed that commitment without wavering.

EC: What do you hope will be accomplished at the April summit here in Rochester?

EA: Levi Strauss & Co. aims to influence how people

around the world perceive and treat others in an effort to make sure that the workplace is always a place where discrimination is not tolerated. By sharing some of our experiences, positions history, we hope more corporations and people will join the fight for equality.

EC: Is there anything you would like to add?

EA: As much as we focus on the craftsmanship of our products, we are equally dedicated to the idea that the fight for equality never goes out of style. We are proud of the fact that our company has -- and continues to be -- a pioneer at the forefront of important social issues, and we're honored to be invited to speak at this summit to share our history and hear from New Yorkers who are fellow pioneers on this critical issue.

Reprinted with Permission. Original article appeared April 2011.

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