

Selisse Berry: Out in Front and Equal to the Challenge

By Kathleen Watt

A RECENT SURVEY (Financial Times / Harris Poll) found that a majority of heterosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, are more likely to buy brands that provide equal workplace benefits for all employees. Perhaps for this reason, fully ninety-eight per cent of the country's most successful companies now include sexual orientation in their Equal Employment Opportunity policies. A decade ago, this number was barely five per cent. Similarly, more than half of all Fortune 500 companies now offer domestic partner benefits—up from one company, New York's *Village Voice*, a generation ago.

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—*Selisse Berry*

This astounding progress toward national LGBT parity nationwide is due, in large measure, to the tireless work of one refreshingly unpretentious ex-seminarian—Selisse Berry, founding executive director and *sine qua non* of Out & Equal™ Workplace Advocates, the national organization dedicated to promoting a safe and equitable workplaces for all, and targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) concerns. In 1996, Berry was a staff of one, located in San Francisco, California. Today, Out & Equal™ has fifteen full-time employees, nine regional affiliates, and employee resource groups (ERGs) around the nation.

So how did she do it? Berry explains, with a faint trace of her native Oklahoma drawl, that her way into the power circles of corporate America has been to speak softly and carry big degrees in theology and education.

Come again?

Berry asserts that her MS in Special Education from the University of Texas and ten years of teaching helped her develop the classroom chops she needed as a diversity trainer. Three years and a master's degree from San Francisco Theological Seminary helped cultivate empathy, dedication to serving others, and expert public speaking. "Both careers," says Berry, "made me ready to face challenges with a positive attitude."

Articulate and amiable, with the assured grace that comes from unwavering conviction, this petite blonde is definitely "all that". Her effectiveness is annually displayed at the Out & Equal™ Workplace Summit, where human resource and diversity professionals, LGBT employees and straight allies from around the world share best practices for achieving workplace equality "so that emerging ERG's don't have to reinvent the wheel."

Best known for the Summit, Out & Equal™ may be best characterized by its acclaimed "Building Bridges Diversity Training Program", which has been facilitating corporate inclusion initiatives for more than a decade, and has produced a steady and growing stream of corporate sponsors and constituents. This year's Workplace Summit is expected to draw some 2,000 participants.

Out & Equal™'s current list of constituents reads like a *Who's Who* of corporate America: IBM, CitiGroup, Kaiser Permanente, Pacific Gas and Electric, American Airlines have all claimed Out & Equal™ awards—and bragging rights—for achievements in workplace diversity. This year's award nominees include representatives of Hewlett-Packard, Best Buy, Chubb, Nike, PepsiCo, Aetna, Credit Suisse, Dow, Time Warner, Wells Fargo, Intel Corp, Ernst & Young, Raytheon, J.C. Penney and others. "I see big business as essential to our mission," says Berry. "Business often does the right thing by erring on the side of fairness rather than adhering to regressive laws...."

But corporate America is pretty rough—a take-no-prisoners, go-for-the-jugular battle for the bottom line—isn't it?

Sure. "But it's also made up of decent, passionate people," Berry counters, "who genuinely care about making sure the corporate world becomes as accepting and

inclusive as possible.” Married to Cynthia Martin, former President of Eastman Kodak's Global Customer Service and Support, Berry is uniquely qualified to say so. “Corporate executives deal with a thousand issues a day [and may never have had] time to think about how LGBT issues impact their jobs [nor much interaction] with LGBT people.

“That’s changing as we raise visibility,” says Berry, “and greater numbers of executives have personal experiences that drive them to embrace diversity from an ethical or emotional motivation... once someone cares on that level, they make a tremendous impact, as allies and advocates.”

Last year, in a *bona fide* coup for diversity advocacy, Berry led her forces to Bentonville, Arkansas, Wal-Mart’s home turf, for a marathon sit-down with top executives of the largest private employer in the world. It was the culmination of years’ worth of grassroots groundwork, begun by one Wal-Mart employee, inspired by the possibilities demonstrated at Out & Equal™. By the end of the sit-down, Berry had won them over, secured new rights for Wal-Mart’s LGBT employees. She had also won Wal-Mart’s sponsorship of the 2006 Out & Equal™ Workplace Summit.

Berry achieves her corporate clout by stressing the business case for diversity. From a corporate perspective, whatever makes employees work harder and better, is devoutly to be wished. Berry exploits this truism by demonstrating how genuine inclusion benefits the bottom line. “At the end of the day,” says Berry, “the purpose of any corporation is successful execution of their business goals, and to make money. [To this end], good executive heads want the company to be a great place to work, and to produce a great product.”

Berry herself was never completely aware of her own sexual orientation until after her teaching stint in Texas. “If I had been, I suspect that teaching in Texas in the early 80’s would have been a very different experience....” Berry moved to San Francisco to train as a Presbyterian Minister at the Graduate Theological Seminary at Berkeley. There Berry finally came out, only to discover that the Presbyterian Church, which had long granted women full enfranchisement, would not ordain an out lesbian. She faced a Hobson’s Choice—would she lie to herself, or lie to everyone else in her life and life’s work?

A fellow seminarian offered her profound advice: “How do you plan to talk to people about love, as a minister, if you can’t talk about *who* you love?” Berry took this advice to heart, then, and ever since. “If we want to be effective in our careers, we have to bring *all* of who we are to our work.” Berry then founded Seminary Lesbians Under Theological Stress—SLUTS (an early instance of her flair for marketing in advocacy) — and left the Presbyterian Church for good. “It’s strange to talk to old pals who are still in the church. I was demonized by so many people—and this was supposed to be a “loving” environment....”

Berry nevertheless continues to nurture a rich spiritual life. She is still active in the ordination of LGBT people, and is the co-editor of the book, *Called Out: Voices and Gifts of LGBT Presbyterian*. Still, reflects Berry, “I’m always amazed that the corporate world is more welcoming of the LGBT community than the churches....”

Always driven by “issues of justice”, Berry got her start when United Way hired her to keep their “Building Bridges” program alive. Berry learned quickly that money—the lack of it—would be her most pressing challenge, so she formed a collaborative partnership with several smaller

organizations and took the Building Bridges training module inside big business. The resulting synergy generated a functional business plan based on a corporate model that would produce additional financial support from United Way and other local and national sources. By 2004, Out & Equal™ Workplace Advocates had become an independent government-recognized nonprofit organization. “If I had thought about where I am now 10 years ago I would have been a little nervous,” confesses Berry, but incremental steps

The workplace is
where society is changing
the most, because
people are working
side by side
with great colleagues who
just happen to be gay.

—*Selisse Berry*

have led to significant and organic growth, for herself and the organizations that she has captained.

Berry says she sometimes daydreams about other ways to apply her prodigious gifts, "...everything from running for office, to joining the Peace Corps, to Habitat for Humanity..." Even after years of liaising with corporate America at the highest levels, she still insists that overtures to come "in-house" are no match for the passion that continues to motivate her diversity advocacy. "I love working with the LGBT community for justice, [and] the presence of Out & Equal™ propels forward society at large, as well as anyone that comes in contact with us."

There remains LGBT work to do. No Fortune 500 company has yet appointed an openly LGBT CEO. Generational, international, family equality and transgender issues are just beginning to emerge. As an organization, Out & Equal™ anticipates an ambitious future, that could include branch offices abroad, an online nexus for LGBT employees, diversity curricula integrated into accredited MBA programs, and.... Well, Selisse Berry has to take a call on the other line. Looks like the Peace Corps will have to wait.

— *Kathleen Watt is a freelance writer in New York City. Read more of her work at WattWork.com*

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