

First Person

Celebrating 20 years of extraordinary support

by John Klenert

Everybody I know loves to celebrate anniversaries, especially if the occasion is one of a momentous event in our lives. The anniversary occasion makes us pause to reflect on what past happening is commemorated, how we have grown or changed into our present condition, and, naturally, where do we see ourselves going in the future.

It does not make any difference whether it is a cyclical anniversary such as an annual birthday or the day we started our current jobs or even holidays like Christmas, Passover, or Ramadan. We also enjoy celebrating such secular annual events like Halloween and the Fourth of July. Very often we take special notice of a numerically divisible anniversary such as the American Bicentennial or our fifth or 10th year with our partners or our high school and college reunions. Regardless of the event, an anniversary is always a special event.

March 4, 1995 is the 20th anniversary of an extraordinary event in the history of Lesbians, Bisexuals, and Gay men in our country. On this day in 1975, the major corporation AT&T forbid workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation. This action was taken voluntarily and without any lawsuits or protests. It was added by then Chairman John deButts simply because it was the right thing to do. AT&T believed then as it does now that discrimination against anyone has no place within our corporation.

Just for a few moments think about 1975. Some of you were perhaps not yet even born or were just teenagers coming to terms with your sexuality. In 1975, Gerald Ford was president, cable was something that connected your speakers and stereo, and digital information was limited to your alarm clock. In 1975, AT&T was known as the Bell System, or

more affectionately as "Ma Bell." Along with Western Electric, Bell Laboratories, and the local Bell telephone companies, it directly employed over one million women and men.

Yet, believe it or not, when this new policy was implemented, nothing happened! The United States government was not overthrown, the stock markets did not crash, and more importantly, everybody still had dial tone. In other words, life continued just as it was the day before.

Allow me to personalize what this important event meant to me. In 1977, I was promoted to a position within C&P Virginia that required a top secret clearance. At that time, I was a semi-closeted Gay man and spent days worrying about the career consequences of not getting the clearance. Finally, I realized that even if I failed to obtain the necessary clearance and had to move on to another job, I could not be fired due to AT&T's equal employment opportunity policy. (This part of my story has a happy ending. I received the clearance, performed my job well, and was promoted to AT&T's federal division a few years later.)

It is interesting to note that when the Bell System was officially dismantled on Jan. 1, 1984, the new AT&T retained the old EEO policy. The seven newly established Regional Bell Operating Companies initially excluded sexual orientation protection in their EEO policies. Only in the past few years has this policy been reinstated.

So much for the past. Let us now discuss the present. Some of the most important work in the Gay movement is now occurring in our workplaces. Over 250 companies have mirrored AT&T's policies regarding sexual orientation. Our community has embraced National Coming Out Day for both our personal and

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business lives. In the past few years, we have witnessed the rise of employee resource groups dealing with our issues. We have seen Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay male employees work with their corporate human resources departments to help them understand the unique talents and needs that our community brings to our workplaces. At my company, our group is LEAGUE — Lesbian, Bisexual and Gay United Employees at AT&T.

Groups such as LEAGUE work to insure that those who choose to be out at work can still have a productive and

rewarding career. Simply put, we smash lavender ceilings! We also work to insure that those who choose not to be out at work still have their social and work environmental needs fulfilled. We work to change people's behavior, not their religious beliefs. Unlike some recent headlines, fag jokes should have no place in our offices and factories. We believe we have been hired for the talents we have to help insure our company's success in the global marketplace and therefore, homophobia should be eradicated.

And what of the future? I naively thought that everyone would support our basic belief that everybody deserves a rewarding and productive career in our chosen profession. WRONG! The Feb. 6 issue of *Fortune* quotes Bob Knight of the Family Research Council as vowing: "It is rollback time. No one should be forced to employ people whose lifestyle and values they deem repulsive, unhealthy and immoral."

There is very real cause for concern here. The American work ethic holds that everyone should contribute to society. Now even this fundamental belief is under attack. Lesbians, Bisexuals, and Gay male employees should be extra vigilant and insist their companies continue to value all employees for their contributions to the success of their firms.

I salute AT&T as all its Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay employees celebrate 20 years of extraordinary support. Is our company perfect? No, it's not. No company is perfect. But as we work together to make sure the common bonds of our humanity are enshrined in our corporate philosophy, not only will AT&T and all its employees prosper, so will our entire community and country.

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