

Digital Queers: Workplace Activism Goes On-Line

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At a staff meeting in late 1992, computer magazine publisher Bill Ziff called for one last question, and Jeff Pittelkau had to muster all his courage to make a sensitive request: Would Ziff-Davis Publishing Co. agree to provide health and other benefits for the same-sex partners of employees?

"He spent 10 minutes answering on the spot, and he committed to doing it," Pittelkau said.

Pittelkau, the test lab director for MacWeek and MacUser magazines, credits his gumption that day to his experience with Digital Queers, an organization of computer-savvy professionals dedicated to improving the workplace for gay and lesbian employees.

Operating from a couple of bare-bones rooms in a San Francisco office building, DQ co-founders and longtime Silicon Valley-ites Tom Rielly and Karen Wickre raise money and solicit donations of equipment and software to help bring other gay and lesbian groups into the Electronic Age. They also plan frequent trips to speak at conferences and to visit other organizations, where they help plug

in new computers, install modems and software and teach novices to use electronic mail and the Internet.

Rielly, for example, recently spent 2½ weeks in Washington and New York working with the Human Rights Campaign Fund, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, the Victory Fund (a political action committee that supports gay candidates), and Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.

The aim of longtime pals Wickre and Rielly is to encourage gay and lesbian workers to meld their professional and private lives through on-line networking and grassroots activism. A key part of the agenda is to provide support for domestic partner benefits and other progressive personnel policies in businesses small and large.

"We believe we can provide a professional and social network, a shared sense, something in common," Rielly said. "We're gay and we know about technology." That much is clear from the screen saver on Rielly's office Power Macintosh: "We're here, we're queer, we have email."

Rielly, a marketing executive for a Silicon Valley software company,

was motivated in part to form Digital Queers in 1992 after the loss of two close friends to AIDS. Realizing how important the gay community was to him at a time of crisis, he wanted to strengthen it.

To help, he recruited Wickre, a computer industry marketing and

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TOM RIELLY

Co-founder of gay cybergroup

publishing executive who worked for a time at 3DO, the software entertainment company.

Together, the two run DQ as full-time volunteers. To pay her bills, Wickre does some free-lance magazine writing; despite all his on-the-road evangelism for DQ, Rielly maintains his position as director of strategic relations for Radius Inc. in Sunnyvale, Calif.

Rielly is quick to note that his

DQ activism enhances his job of striking relationships for Radius with other Silicon Valley companies.

"Whenever I have a problem to solve at Radius," he said, "I will absolutely use my gay connections at other companies." The first thing he did as a DQ activist, he recalled, was to help procure domestic partner benefits at SuperMac Technology, a Macintosh-software company later bought by Radius.

Trading on SuperMac's connections with Apple Computer Inc., he later briefed John Sculley, then Apple's chief executive, on the subject. Sculley soon after announced that Apple would also offer benefits for employees' same-sex partners.

Such empowerment is exhilarating for Rielly, 31, who grew up in an affluent Chicago suburb where he felt he had to keep his sexual orientation largely under wraps. As a high school junior, he attempted suicide. Much of the motivation for what he does now, he said, is to help others feel OK about being gay.

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Digital Queers has become so well known, in fact, that corporations such as Pacific Bell, Apple and Microsoft now openly donate to its causes and its raucous—and extremely popular—fund-raising bashes at MacWorld and other computer trade shows.

Wickre, 43, reminisced about an early DQ fund-raiser for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, where 400 guests crowded into a San Francisco gallery. "We made more at the door than the task force's yearly budget," she said. "It really struck a chord: The personal and the political meet the professional."

(As for those who would jeer at the name, Rielly and Wickre have a quick comeback: Would you prefer, perhaps, Digital Gays, Bisexuals, Lesbians and Transgendered—Digital GiBLLeTs?)

Recognizing DQ's access to a pool of talented high-tech professionals, recruiters for Microsoft and Apple have started posting jobs throughout the organization. Increasingly, Wickre said, DQ is

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Tom Rielly, left, and Karen Wickre, co-founders of Digital Queers, work to bring groups into the Electronic Age.

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drawing a new breed of member, such as the information services arm of a big publishing company and even the Armani fashion house, which senses a robust marketing opportunity.

One goal is to have enough funds rolling in that DQ can hire a full-time executive director to explore new directions.

For Pittelkau, DQ has been instrumental to both personal and professional growth. "It put me in touch with a large group of 'out' gays and lesbians in pretty significant companies and roles," he said. "We got to know each other and really felt a lot less alone."

The e-mail address for Digital Queers is digiqueers@aol.com