

northwest

Rolling Back Oppression

Wal-Mart's commitment to the queer community

by Sassafra Lowrey

The retail giant Wal-Mart has joined the National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce (NGLCC) as part of its "commitment to diversity." Considered to be the largest queer business development and economic advocacy organization in the world, NGLCC works to foster dialogue between corporations and sexual minority producers and consumers. According to Pride at Work, the U.S. sexual minorities community has \$610 billion in purchasing power, a fact that persuades some businesses to specifically advertise to queer customers. Yet some queer activists and organizations wonder if it is greed and not diversity that has been the catalyst in Wal-Mart's new policies.

With 22 locations in Oregon and an additional store in Vancouver, Wash., Wal-Mart's interest in supporting diversity might provide a new queer-friendly shopping option for those in the community, as well as a new market for Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart has become the most recent in a string of major corporations—including American Airlines, Kodak, IBM, Intel and Wells Fargo—to support diversity by partnering with NGLCC.

In an August statement, NGLCC stated: "No longer is just marketing to the LGBT segment enough. No longer is having a corporate nondiscrimination policy that includes sexual orientation enough."

The statement continues to say that true commitment is expressed by investing in queer-owned businesses with the same level of support as the company shows to other diverse segments of the community. "Their supplier base, those from whom they purchase goods and services, must look like the customer and employee base they have or are trying to attract," NGLCC stated.

Since the partnership was announced, Wal-Mart has come under heavy scrutiny from right-wing conservative Christian groups. "Although Wal-Mart has never excluded homosexuals from being employees, customers or suppliers, the company wanted to be more closely identified with promoting the homosexual agenda," stated the American Family Association. In calls to action to its supporters, it argued that the change was sparked by money, not

diversity, claiming, "Wal-Mart has decided to push aside that legacy left by [founder] Sam Walton and joined those who look at the bottom line and stock prices."

Joining NGLCC is only the most recent step in Wal-Mart's demonstrated concern for the welfare of its queer employees and the sexual minorities community at large. The corporation is involved with the Human Rights Campaign, the Family Pride Coalition, Out and Equal, the Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League, the National Gay and Lesbian Journalist Association and Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. In 2003, Wal-Mart began listing sexual orientation in its nondiscrimination policy, thus providing protection for gay, lesbian and bisexual employees. Based on his extensive conversations with the corporation, Justin Nelson, co-founder and president of NGLCC, said Wal-Mart definitely will change the nondiscrimination policy to cover gender identity and expression, although he would not confirm when this would become official. This step would offer protection from workplace discrimination for transgender, transsexual and other gender-variant employees. In 2004, Wal-Mart amended its corporate policy, stating that domestic partners were to be considered "immediate family."

Despite this validation of queer relationships, the corporation does not yet offer domestic partner benefits for its sexual minority employees. Some are concerned that indicates a lack of sincerity in Wal-Mart's diversity platform.

Portland City Commissioner Sam Adams said: "I'd like to see them back up their new membership with providing domestic partner benefits to their employees. It will show whether this is window dressing and part of the marketing department, or really part of their efforts to improve their business practices."

According to Nelson, the issue of domestic partner benefits is part of a continual dialogue between Wal-Mart and NGLCC. He said: "It is our job to ensure that any company that we partnership with continues to become better corporate citizens.... [Domestic partner benefits are] a prime component."

In a statement on the Wal-Mart Web site, Lee



Wal-Mart has taken a step forward toward gender equality but has yet to adopt a domestic partnership policy.

H. Scott, president and CEO of the corporation, said: "Diversity doesn't just happen. Just saying we are committed to diversity is not enough; we must put in place the right systems, processes and leadership to make it happen."

The idea of diversity and change happening over time was echoed by Nelson, who asserted: "Things don't happen overnight in corporate America.... As companies wake up and understand that being inclusive and offering an equality-based workplace is the right thing to do, they understand they need to offer domestic partner benefits, and they need to have inclusive nondiscrimination. It's a journey, not a destination."

Some believe action in the form of domestic partner benefits needs to happen fast. Adams said, "They have our attention, and we should give them six months to follow that up with domestic partner benefits for their employees...if we don't see domestic partner benefits in six months, then this falls into the category of window dressing."

Wal-Mart refused to talk with *Just Out* directly about domestic partner benefits.

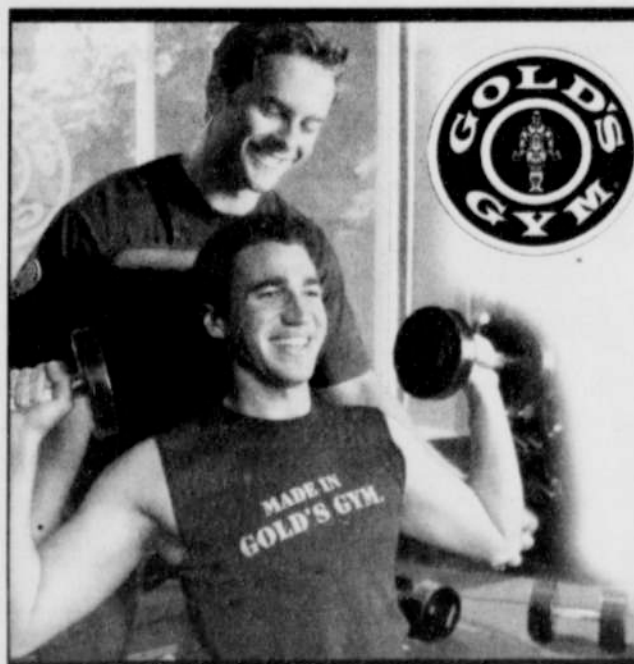
Despite Wal-Mart's diversity goals, many queers do not view this partnership as a positive step for the sexual minorities community or the world at

large. Pride at Work, a national labor organization that fights for queer workers' rights, has long been critical of Wal-Mart and its attempts to market to the sexual minorities community.

"The LGBT community has a long history of being on the forefront of battles for economic and social justice. We firmly believe that the LGBT community will not be enticed by [Wal-Mart], whose corporate values are so diametrically opposed to the values which so many LGBT people hold dear: values of fairness, justice and equality," said Nancy Wohlforth, co-president of Pride at Work.

Portland artist and activist Robbin Ciraulo agrees that the queer community needs to be concerned with social justice issues that do not directly affect us: "If [Wal-Mart] still operates the way they operated in other areas, it wouldn't matter to me [if it offers domestic partner benefits]. As a queer person, even though rights in that area are important to me, I don't discount other issues in the world. Having some child in China make my shoes for 2 cents is a more important issue than whether or not I can get married." 10

SASSAFRAS LOWREY is a Portland freelance writer.



Don't Lose Your

SUMMER BODY!

Come check out
Portland's Premier
Personal Training Gym
with 21 Trainers just waiting
to have at your body.

GOLD'S GYM
IT ALL STARTS HERE!

FREE MEMBERSHIP

FREE
3 DAY VIP PASS

With Fitness Coach Session

NW PORTLAND • CALL 503-228-2626
HURRY! OFFER EXPIRES 11/5/06!

Valid with this card only. Must be 18 with a valid local ID.

PERSONAL TRAINING

2 PERSONAL
TRAINING SESSIONS
\$99

NW PORTLAND • CALL 503-228-2626
HURRY! OFFER EXPIRES 11/5/06!

Valid with this card only. Must be 18 with a valid local ID.

2025 NW Overton • NW Portland • (503) 228-2626

Locally owned in NW Portland, Salem, Keizer, Eugene & Springfield. Over 660 clubs nationwide for your convenience!