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OUT in the MOUNTAINS

Breaking Through the Pink Ceiling

BY ALYX LYONS

At the beginning of February, over 500 GLBT students and professionals attended the seventh annual Reaching Out MBA (Masters of Business Administration) conference at the Westin Copley in Boston. The conference is hosted each year by different universities, and planned and organized by MBA students from those schools. This year's hosts were Harvard Business School, MIT Sloan Business School and Yale School of Management.

According to the conference website (www.reachingoutmba.org), the goal of the conference is to "promote the education, visibility, and networking capabilities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender business leaders in the United States and around the globe." The annual conference provides a forum for students, recent alumni and business leaders to share information, build networks and promote cooperation.

The first conference, named "From the Closet to the Boardroom," was held in 1999 at the Harvard Business School and was attended by 150 students and professionals. The focus of the conferences has shifted over the years. Early on, the focus was on personal experiences of individuals in the corporate world and on how to reduce the isolation of GLBT business leaders.

The next several years of the conference saw a shift towards strategizing about advocacy issues, such as domestic partner benefits. The primary focus of this year's conference, according to steering committee member Dale Schilling (MBA 2005, Harvard Business School), was on how GLBT leaders in the corporate world can stand up, be out, and effect change in individual organizations.

More than 40 corporate sponsors supported the event and looked for new talent in graduating MBA candidates. The list of sponsors included IBM, citigroup, Credit Suisse/First Boston, Ford Motor Company, American Airlines, JP

Morgan / Chase, Pfizer, and Microsoft (for a complete list, go to www.reachingoutmba.org).

The first keynote speaker was Ted Childs, Vice President of Global Workforce Diversity at IBM. His responsibility is to ensure the application of workforce diversity programs and policies for all 130,000 employees worldwide at IBM. According to Mr. Childs, IBM is a global leader in diversity issues and was the first company to offer benefits to pay for the medical bills of individuals undergoing gender reassignment. IBM also extends domestic partner benefits to all its locations. If you are an employee living in Mexico, Japan, or Russia,

GLBT professionals are typically held to a higher standard and therefore must be the "best of the breed" and "raise the bar."

for instance, you and your partner would be covered under IBM's domestic partner benefits. Mr. Childs also spoke about the importance of not isolating ourselves: "It is hard to stand against someone when you know them."

Keynote speaker Jean Dolan recapped her coming out story. With a long-time interest in the military, intelligence, and national security, she often has had to walk a fine line of being out or not. After several years in the U.S. Army, serving in both tactical and strategic assignments worldwide, she resigned and joined the firm Booz Allen Hamilton, a security and intelligence security company.

Keynote speaker Lowell Selvin challenged us to break through the "Pink Ceiling." He is the chairman and CEO of PlanetOut, Inc., the first GLBT company to be listed on Wall Street (LBGT on the Nasdaq). Selvin described the keys to GLBT success as leaders. First, like many minorities, GLBT professionals are typically held to a higher standard and therefore must prove themselves. We must be the "best of the breed"

and "raise the bar."

Selvin challenged the crowd that it is not simply enough to be out in the workplace. As business professionals we are often faced with a "Pink Ceiling" that gives us three choices: ignore it, run from it or break through it. We were exhorted to create an individual strategic plan or personal mission statement. Holding onto our individual core values, Selvin said, is a fundamental step into breaking through the barriers and effecting change.

Of 508 participants, there were just 70 lesbians. When I asked Dale Schillings why there weren't more women, he told me that this under-representation has been an issue since the conferences began. Under-representation is not just limited to the conference, but also to the composition of business schools and corporations nationwide. Women make up 30 percent of the graduate student body in business schools across the country, and how many of them are lesbian is unknown.

The barriers facing lesbians in corporate management are

many: exclusion from informal networks (the "old boys" club), stereotyping and preconceptions of women's roles and abilities, and failure of senior leadership to advance women's careers. Out of the six organizers for this year's conference, just one was a lesbian. Schilling said that the conference organizers are very aware of this issue, and are striving to include lesbians on the steering committee.

It was evident at the conference that although the current political climate may be hostile to GLBT people, business leaders, both gay and straight, continue to push for equality. Over 220 Fortune 500 companies now offer domestic partner benefits. A substantial number of U.S. companies continue to blaze the trail because equality is good business. ▼

Alyx Lyons lives in Burlington, was formerly in management at Onion River Co-op/City Market, and is pursuing her MBA at the University of Vermont. For more information about major U.S. corporations' treatment of GLBT employees, go to www.hrc.org/worknet.