



Times Tribune photo by Joe Meleno

Richard Rudy: Addressing the needs of High Tech Gays group

Richard P. Rudy, 39, is president of the area social and support group High Tech Gays. The group started two and a half years ago with 12 members and now has more than 300 members from more than 100 electronics companies. Rudy is a quality assurance manager at Santa Clara-based Laserscope.

Q: Why was High Tech Gays founded and how has the group changed since it began?

A: Our reason for forming the group was networking to meet other gays in the high-tech business and find out what their interests were and where the job openings were. Also, we wanted to meet one another on a social basis outside the usual bar meeting places to find people more professionally oriented. We have expanded from the simple networking and socializing to include addressing business issues. We are attempting to get 115 area companies to adopt a non-discriminatory policy (toward gays) as part of their company policy. Along with age, religion and sex, we want the companies to add sexual orientation to the list of non-discriminatory categories in the employee handbooks.

Q: How are the companies responding?

A: We are meeting benign opposition. Most claim they don't discriminate and have no intention of discriminating, and so they see no need for such a policy. We started working with Hewlett-Packard Co., which is known to be a very employee-oriented company. After meeting with a group of 20 of their own employees, they still refused to adopt the policy. Their argument was that as long as it's not mandated by state or federal law, they see no reason to adopt it.

Q: How are gays discriminated against in the work place?

A: If your boss has an aversion toward gays, a gay employee is put in a bad position and has no recourse in the company. Being gay has nothing to do with your job. Many gays "stay in the closet" at work because they are afraid people will perceive that as a barrier in their relationships at work. You feel separate from the rest of the corporate social structure. You don't come into the office in the morning and chat about what you did over the weekend. Whereas, if you are straight and talked about your dates, that would be fine. If you're gay, you can't put a picture of your lover or significant other on your desk or get personal calls at work. All these things straight people take for granted.

Q: How is the AIDS epidemic affecting gay workers' rights?

A: It is, I think, adding very significantly to the barriers already in the workplace. It's encouraging to see cities such as Los Angeles adopting ordinances that say you cannot discriminate against someone who has AIDS. But then in Colorado, it's just the opposite. They want to establish a registry of people suspected of having AIDS and have that available to the public through the (state) health office. That's very frightening, because then we are talking about quarantines and leper colonies. I haven't heard of any of our members losing their jobs, but it's happening elsewhere. It's only a matter of time before it happens here.

Q: We've heard it's difficult for gays to get top government clearance for defense

contract work at companies. Is that the case?

A: It's a big issue in our area. We have several members who are looking to get security clearances at Lockheed and other companies. In order to get clearance, you need approval from an organization called DISCO which is a branch of the Defense Department. That organization has a written policy which states they are to regard gay people in the same category as felons. The policy then is that no gays should be given the clearance. That decision goes to a review board which fortunately doesn't have that policy and will quite often reverse the decision by DISCO. The problem is that the process that normally takes six weeks now takes as much as a year for the gay applicants. The company may very well terminate (the job for) that person who can't get the clearance quickly. If they can't get the clearance, they're useless to the company.

Q: How does High Tech Gays communicate these problems to companies?

A: We sent a survey to 115 companies and got a 20 percent response. Some answers were very positive and some were very negative — about one-half each. (Editor's note: One question on the survey asked: Would you have any reservations about hiring or promoting a gay person to certain positions in your company?) Some disturbing responses came in on that, and one said gays can hold any job they wanted to as long as they don't have to work with the public. We were very upset to see that answer, but we know where we stand, so we are glad to get the answers.