

**Espirit De Core At Apple:
Gay workers still fight for recognition at computer maker.**

By Michelle Levander. Knight-Ridder Newspapers

SAN JOSE, Calif. Slumped at a table, the senior human resource executive gulped his beer and looked out at the bright lights of one of the biggest bashes of the year for the nation's gay and lesbian community.

As couples swayed to the music on the lawn at Apple Computer Inc., he held up his glass. "I'm straight," he said abruptly. "I'll nezer understand those people."

Even at their own party, members of the gay and lesbian community can be seen as outsiders. That casual rejection – at an October party in Cupertino, Calif., celebrating the growing clout of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force – illustrates some of the resistance faced by gay and lesbian activists as they try to gain recognition in one of the most progressive corners of the corporate world – Silicon Valley.

Nowhere have some of these contradictions come to the surface more clearly than at Apple – a firm that is gaining a reputation as a national pioneer on gay and lesbian rights. The Cupertino company is also a place where employees had to fight a long, frustrating battle to gain new benefits this year.

Gay activists have made their most dramatic inroads in Silicon Valley, successfully fighting for the same health care benefits for their partners as those granted married couples and for corporate policies that prohibit bias on the basis of sexual orientation. More than half of the nation's 30-odd companies that offer domestic partner benefits are high-technology firms – and most are based in the Bay Area.

But corporations that often pride themselves on their hip, young California image also have erected unexpected barriers to gays and lesbians as they try to be included in the corporate world's definition of diversity. And other obstacles have come from within the gay community itself as men and women struggle with fears about demanding equal treatment at work. Some agonize about taking a stand that could cost them their careers, and others, still in the closet, have worked against the effort to avoid being branded as gay.

"Most heterosexuals have no idea of what guts it takes to put your name on the line," said Frederick Parsons, a Lockheed Missiles & Space Co. employee who just won a three-year battle to have a gay group recognized as an official company organization. "You have to come out an additional step to do that, and once you do that you realize there's no turning back. When we first approached the president of the company, we had no idea what response we'd get.

At the heart of the matter is the hostile social environment facing gay and lesbian activists.

"Overt racism and prejudice against most groups based on race, religion, gender or national origin, is not only illegal, but socially very unacceptable in most business settings," said David Blumberg, a San Francisco venture capital consultant active in the gay community. "This is not the case with gays and lesbians, since most firms do not have 'sexual orientation' clauses in their employment policies. Most governmental Institutions do not enforce such policies, and social mores view homosexuality with fear and loathing."

At Apple, company officials have gone further publicly than those at almost any other company to make clear their commitment to treating gay and lesbian employees as equals. Apple employee Daniel Sonnenfeld (above, left) is able to provide company benefits to his domestic partner, Frank Tatko. Apple's chief litigator Elizabeth Birch was instrumental in getting the firm to provide benefits for domestic partners.