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Bill Taylor

It doesn't sound like much of an ambition but Michael Bach would really like to be out of a job.

Not so he can kick back, pick up his pogy cheque and drink beer. He'd simply prefer it if his position wasn't necessary.

"That's what I told them when I interviewed at KPMG," Bach says. "It's how I feel about Pride at Work, too."

He's national director of diversity, inclusion and equity with the accountancy giant KPMG. Six years ago, he also became founding director of Pride at Work, with the aim of "realizing fully inclusive workplaces" for Canada's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community.

This led to the recent Inspire Awards naming Bach "Person of the Year." He'll also be co-grand marshal of the Pride parade July 3.

In Bach's ideal world, no one would question, or even think about, anyone else's gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation.

"Speaking as an openly gay man, I want to be accepted and respected for who I am, not what I am," he says. "I hate the word 'tolerance.' My mother-in-law tolerates me!"

"I'm an average married guy who goes home from work, complains about his taxes, waters the lawn and walks the dog. It's dull. I like dull! But I want people not to care."

Bach, 40, has been married for just over a year to Mike Neff, an accountant, "believe it or not," from Kansas City.

"I cringe when I say it," Bach says. "I'd always said I'd never marry an accountant. I keep justifying it by saying at least he's not an auditor!"

He was able to sponsor Neff as a landed immigrant; not something that could have happened if the couple wanted to settle in the United States.

Bach has lived and worked in New York, Los Angeles and — "an unfortunate mistake" — Nashville, finding various degrees of tolerance but few legal rights for same-sex couples.

"There are 30 or more states where you can be fired for almost any reason without legal recourse," he says. "They can get rid of you for showing up in the wrong suit. So if you're considered to be of the wrong sexual orientation..."

The situation is far better here, although Bach says many in the queer community "almost want to see a rainbow flag flying from the window" before they feel comfortable being fully open with an employer: "They choose to hide out from fear of the unknown."

Pride at Work's aim is to eliminate this.

"We still need to have this conversation, to bring together employers who had their foot in the door but weren't taking that next step," Bach says. "I wanted to bring them together to have a critical mass to help both employers and employees make this journey."

Success came almost immediately. Within its first year, Pride at Work had signed up 11 corporate partners.

"It actually took about six weeks," he says. "We were dumbfounded. It costs \$5,000 to join. So it wasn't just, 'Hey, come along.' It was 'come along and bring a cheque.'"



Michael Bach is national director of diversity, inclusion and equity at KPMG, leading the drive for fully inclusive workplaces for queer Canadians. He will lead the parade on Sunday as Pride's person of the year.

ANDREW FRANCIS WALLACE/TORONTO STAR

The group now has 32 corporate partners, including “every major financial organization in the country but one. And they have pen in hand, ready to sign up. We’re in five cities — Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Winnipeg and Calgary — and have two full-time staff and 15 board members. It’s a real get-it-done board. Everyone has to work.”

Pride at Work has networking events and educational programs. The website (prideatwork.ca) has recently been redone to include job referrals and a resource centre. It’s open to anyone, not just members.

Bach plans to step down as director in two years “to make sure it exists long after me. It cannot be the Michael Bach show. It has to have a life of its own.”

He’s been surprised by some of the companies that have signed up.

“You knew the big banks were going to be there but there were some less obvious ones who are really taking a stand and saying they’re going to be totally inclusive employers. They may not have a huge LGBT agenda but they’re saying if you are in that group, not only will we hire you but we’ll make sure you’re in a safe space. You can come out and be safe.

“As someone who’s been out since early Paleolithic times, I want to be able to talk about my husband and when someone says, ‘How was your weekend,’ not to have to lie or deflect the question.”

Bach came out when he was 16 after “a pretty rough childhood” in Toronto, enduring years of physical and emotional abuse at school.

“I was an effeminate kid who didn’t like to get dirty or play sports,” he says. “I resolved after that to try to do something about it. I don’t want kids even thinking of committing suicide.”

He does have one secret, though, which is why he never rolls up his sleeves at work. On his left arm, another “sleeve” is in progress — an all-enveloping tattoo, incorporating lotus flowers and other symbols of Bach’s Buddhist faith.

“It’s not something I can show off at the office,” he says. “But I can’t see myself wearing long sleeves at the Pride parade. So all will be revealed.”

Coming out again, in a rather different way.