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Outstanding Voices: How a dance at a party set Kinman Tong on a mission

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Editor's note: As part of our Business of Pride publication every year, the Business Times honors a dozen or more Outstanding Voices honorees. Click here to read about our other 2021 honorees.

Kinman Tong

Partner and Inclusion & Diversity Advisory Board member, Moss Adams LLP



SPENCER BROWN

Kinman Tong, partner and Inclusion & Diversity Advisory Board member, Moss Adams LLP

Building relationships and networks is central to all Kinman Tong does at Moss Adams, an accounting and consulting firm with offices in the Bay Area.

Tong organized the Moss Adams Pride Business Resource Group's activities for the region's eight locations to accelerate the firm's success in attracting, developing, retaining and advancing LGBTQ professionals. He regularly educates partners and allies on the

importance of deeply understanding the LGBTQ community's challenges and articulates how to ensure that LGBTQ employees have opportunities to grow and develop.

He was most recently appointed to the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants LGBTQ Initiatives Committee at the national level and is part of the Northern California Grantmaker's Racial Equity Action Institute's second cohort that connects racial equity specialists from philanthropy, business, government and nonprofits. As a gay Asian immigrant, the intersectionality of diversity is top of mind and he always strives to find ways to bring people together and find common ground.

When did you come out? Coming out wasn't a big deal. I was fortunate being in the Bay Area for college at Berkeley and in public accounting, which is, in some ways, very old school, white, male dominated, but at the same time, diverse for a business field. I remember around six or seven years ago at a party or social event in the Bay Area where I was dancing with my partner, Patrick, and there were individuals who made comments and laughed about it and I was like, really? That became an impetus for me and a colleague in addressing this at the leadership level at Moss Adams, and it sprung us into action as a company to form its first business resource group and that started a movement of education, learning, development and understanding of LGBTQ issues and it helped initiate other BRGs for other marginalized groups as well. Our company is now committed to becoming an anti-racist firm.

Are there challenges to being a leader in your industry as an out LGBTQ person? There wasn't a lack of representation at the leadership level. I graduated from Berkeley so there were LGBTQ leaders and I was in the process of coming out myself — so I wasn't paying much attention to it. But as I graduated and joined my first firm, I was able to find leaders that promoted diversity and inclusion (and that includes LGBTQ) and was able to tap into that.

I tell people that I've never really had to "come out, come out" in the professional world — I just kind of adapted to it and became active and involved and continued to throughout my career. There are different moments in my career where I was more vocal or more active, and I'm especially stepping up a lot more in the last six or seven years. I'm fortunate that I'm in the Bay Area — you don't

have to tell people, they just know and don't care. But at the same time, I have experienced negative incidents here that makes me think "did that really happen in the Bay Area?" "Did that really happen in a meeting?" And that doesn't just pertain to LGBTQ issues, but also racial equity issues. There's always more work to be done.

Age: 39

Residence: Berkeley

Education: Bachelor's in business administration, UC Berkeley

Family: Partner; three cat children, Leia, Moana and Mochi

Fun fact: "I am a lepidopterist, and during the pandemic, discovered that I have green thumbs and have started collecting and propagating succulents and marantaceae (calatheas-marantas-ctenanthes-stromanthes)."

Has the pandemic and working from home spotlighted some of the negative incidents you've experienced? I would say that over the past year and the growth in awareness of racial justice issues and rise in hate crimes against Black, Asian and immigrant communities, I think a lot of people struggle. Either with being alone or being stuck in the same routine, or having so much to do between work and taking care of their families. People are burned out.

But one of the things that has been empowering is that people are able to find opportunities to grow and learn in different ways (some have more time since they're not traveling). A lot of what happened last year has united people. But I think a lot about regression, women's rights and recent threats to Roe v. Wade, it's like, how are we back here? Society becomes complacent and gets comfortable. We cannot rest, and 2020 showed us that.

Are you hopeful or fearful for the next generation? I'm hopeful because there are more leaders and people standing up and especially by those who are allies, and this is more important than anything else. They make our numbers more significant and our voices louder. The last year has shown me that a lot of us can work through differences and see the intersectionality of diversity. None

of us are just one thing, there are so many layers. I'm a gay Asian immigrant who comes from a religious background. With so many layers, we can find ways to relate to one another and find commonalities, and I think it's great that the BIPOC community has especially come together to address Black Lives Matter and then to stop Asian hate. The more we try to divide ourselves, the more we fail.

What's your advice to young LGBTQ professionals and aspiring leaders in your field? I think more of us can take a role in being vocal and being role models and not being shy or intimidated or speaking up. Be the one in the room to be vocal and "poke the bear" for not only yourself, but especially for others that may not have a voice, or may not even be present in the room. We can help others engage and keep people accountable. Also, pay it forward: I became a leader because of the people I surrounded myself with and learned from and I'm very fortunate for that support. When people stop paying it forward, we slide back as a society and go through the whole cycle again. Be open to learn and listen — as a society, we don't listen anymore.

Who most influenced your success as an LGBTQ leader? My uncle. He is a seminarian by trade and an LGBTQ ally and the reason I came here for college where I found my authentic self. He is a straight male who is a man of the cloth and can reconcile his faith with advocating and being a voice for those who are LGBTQ. He has been arrested for fighting for the rights of others. I always remember that he's doing this selfless thing for others and it empowers me to do my part for my community. He's the epitome of an ally.

Diana K. Murphy
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