

2023 Southern States Forum: Pride in Who We Are

On June 15, 2023 Out & Equal, along with Partner company, Airbus, hosted the **2023 Southern States Forum: Pride in Who We Are**, in Mobile, Alabama. This first return to in-person Southern States Forum since the pandemic, brought together more than 120 executives, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) and Human Resource (HR) practitioners, Employee Resource Group (ERG) leaders, and other workplace inclusion change-makers—with over 80 percent attending their first Out & Equal event in the region.

About Out & Equal's Southern States Initiative

This year, the LGBTQ+ community faced unprecedented attacks with the majority of the [roughly 500 anti-LGBTQ+ bills](#) introduced in Southern states. Out & Equal's Southern States Initiative blazes a trail of inclusion and belonging for workplaces from Texas up to Virginia. While these states are complex geographies of strong, diverse LGBTQ+ and ally communities, lagging laws are undermining LGBTQ+ equality and wellbeing.

According to [research](#) by the Movement Advancement Project and Campaign for Southern Equality:

- One in three LGBTQ+ people in the United States live in the South
- The region is home to over half a million transgender adults—more than any other region in the United States
- More than one in five LGBTQ+ Southerners are Black—more than any other region of the country
- LGBTQ+ Southerners are more likely than LGBTQ+ people outside the South to be religiously affiliated, with over half of LGBTQ+ Southerners being religiously affiliated

For the last five years, we have invested in the South, building networks, holding events, developing unique resources for Southern workplaces, and sustaining our community through virtual forums during the pandemic.



Speakers (L-R): Jennifer Ogle (Airbus), Allyn Shaw (Wells Fargo), Isabel Porras (Out & Equal), Franklin Ortiz (Airbus), Deena Fidas (Out & Equal), Sam Slate (Dell), Monique Evans (Texas Capital Bank), Anthony Gutierrez (Gilead Sciences)

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In partnership with Airbus, we selected Mobile as a first-time host city, one that embodies so much of the American South—a city undergoing rapid growth and redevelopment, attracting new workers and younger generations. At the same time, the city is steeped in its own history of the fight for the civil rights of African Americans as well as a legacy of economic challenges.

The theme, *Pride in Who We Are*, served as a clarion call in this challenging year to be centered in our value and purpose, and to develop participants' skills in storytelling for workplace change and advocacy. Representing 26 states and more than 60 companies, participants left the day ready to make change and support workplaces where LGBTQ+ employees and allies can belong and thrive, across the South and beyond.



Jennifer Ogle, Head of Employees Relations & Transformation at Airbus, shared the Power of Visibility for individuals and companies in the South

WELCOME AND KICKOFF

Deena Fidas (She/Her), Managing Director & Chief Programs and Partnerships Officer, Out & Equal and **Franklin Ortiz (He/Him)**, Head of Finance, Airbus Services, President Pride@Airbus, Airbus NA, began the day with an energetic welcome and grounding in the uniqueness of our work in the South.

“Our Southern States Initiative is a rebuke to anyone who thinks that inclusion is relegated to only a few geographies. We are here and our resolve is only getting stronger for everyone to be able to be both out and equal—at work and in our communities.”

—Deena Fidas (She/Her), Managing Director & Chief Programs and Partnerships Officer, Out & Equal

Franklin Ortiz, Head of Finance, Airbus Services, President Pride@Airbus, Airbus NA, echoed the importance of a unified strategy for LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion and shared his personal story as an ex-Mormon and Latino gay man navigating both career advancement and community acceptance.

“By being at the forefront of LGBTQ+ Equality, workplaces attract not only top talent but also corporate investment in the Southern Region. The South is ready to accept the LGBTQ+ community, we just need to give the microphone to the right people. Allies and the LGBTQ+ community need to be louder!”

—Franklin Ortiz (He/Him), Head of Finance, Airbus Services, President Pride@Airbus, Airbus NA

INVESTING IN AUTHENTICITY

Next, **Allyn Shaw (He/Him)**, Chief Operating Officer of Consumer Technology, Wells Fargo and Vice-Chair of the Out & Equal Board of Directors, gave a personal account of his journey navigating the corporate finance world as a Black, gay man. He segued to how leaders like himself mentor and leverage their positions as executives to further institutional investments in talent mobility and diversity. He then welcomed his friend and former colleague, **Monique Evans (She/Her)**, Senior Associate-CRE, Texas Capital Bank, who gave a rousing TED-style talk on her life journey, navigating geographies, communities, racism, transphobia, and ultimately finding her own purpose and strength as a strong, Black, trans woman.

Shaw and Evans then sat for a wide-ranging fireside chat and engaged the audience in candid conversations about the effects of anti-LGBTQ+ violence and legislation in the region, subtle forms of inclusion and exclusion in Southern society, and more.

“We are a force of thousands of global change makers. And we have that particular affliction of impatience around inequality and the daring ability to imagine spaces of transformation before they happen.”

—Allyn Shaw (He/Him), Chief Operating Officer of Consumer Technology, Wells Fargo and Vice-Chair of the Out & Equal Board of Directors

“I invite you all to stand with pride! Hold my hand, and if your knees buckle, lean on my shoulder. Yes, our strength is in our individuality, but our force is in our collective power and effort. We have each other! We have our allies! Keep standing with pride!”

—Monique Evans (She/Her), Senior Associate-CRE, Texas Capital Bank



Allyn Shaw, Chief Operating Officer of Consumer Technology, Wells Fargo and Vice Chair of the Out & Equal Board of Directors (L), in conversation with Monique Evans, Senior Associate-CRE at Texas Capital Bank (R), on thriving through authenticity



Franklin Ortiz, Head of Finance, President of Pride@Airbus (R), shares his personal story with Isabel Porras, Sr Director of Leadership, Learning & Development at Out & Equal (L)

MASS PARTICIPATION: OUR LGBTQ+ AND ALLY STORIES

Following the modeling of the opening speakers' powerful stories, Fidas was joined by **Isabel Porras (She/Her)**, Senior Director of Leadership, Learning and Development, Out & Equal, to lead the audience through a powerful unpacking on how each of us—LGBTQ+ and allies—relate to the topics of LGBTQ+ identities and terminology in the workplace. Fidas and Porras shared their personal stories of when they first became aware of LGBTQ+ people to illustrate how these early influences form the basis of understanding for individual efficacy in leveraging our personal stories to effect systemic change. Following the breakout discussions, attendees spoke candidly about their experiences on a range of topics, including intergenerational conversations and dialogues around faith communities. Some even shared how they felt as a child, watching the televised Stonewall news coverage.

"We need to understand what holds us back from speaking up as much as we need to understand our goals. Unpacking our early understandings of LGBTQ+ identities is a crucial first step."

—Isabel Porras (She/Her), Senior Director of Leadership, Learning and Development, Out & Equal



Jennifer Ogle, Head of Employee Relations & Transformation at Airbus, spoke powerfully about corporate leadership in advancing LGBTQ+ workplace equality in the South

THE POWER OF VISIBILITY

Jennifer Ogle (She/Her), Head of Employee Relations & Transformation, Airbus, who was raised in the South and has deep familial roots in the area, offered a powerful take on her own visibility. As an out lesbian executive and among the first LGBTQ+ couples to be married in the state of Alabama, she talked about the vital roles that allies play in the fight for equality.

“I want to be part of the change needed in the culture in order to drive more inclusion. I’m energized by others who are as passionate as me; especially when I see Allies step up! Allies are critical to keep us moving forward, especially when they demonstrate inclusion by living PRIDE not just in June, but every day. It’s in our best interests to influence our cities and states where we live and work to be more inclusive and diverse. I believe this is the best way to support hiring demands, retention initiatives, and economic growth of the Southern States.”

—Jennifer Ogle (She/Her), Head of Employee Relations & Transformation, Airbus

YOUR STORY. YOUR TRUTH. YOUR POWER.

In a powerful panel discussion, Porras engaged with three visible Southern LGBTQ+ corporate leaders about their origin stories and the intersection between the business community and public policy.

Anthony Gutierrez (He/Him), Senior HIV Community Liaison, Gilead Sciences, articulated the community engagement and unique setbacks they experienced in publishing extensive research on the state of the HIV epidemic in the South.

Expanding on the theme of real-world impacts of the current public policy environment in the South, **Sam Slate (He/Him)**, Consultant, Commercial Client Product Marketing, Dell, reflected on how sharing his personal story as a father and a veteran at the Texas state house and around the US Capitol is vital to this change work.

Expressing gratitude, Franklin Ortiz reflected on how his intersectionality afforded him access to many spaces where the power of his story could put a personal face on the impacts of policy decisions.

TELLING YOUR STORY FOR IMPACT

Storytelling as an inclusion tool is particularly powerful in the workplace. Nearly every change—from the first ERG, to trans-inclusive healthcare benefits, to companies' first public policy weigh-in, began because someone shared their story. In a final focused learning session, Fidas and Porras walked attendees through the science, structure, and strategy of building and sharing our personal stories to have the most impact.

"The theme is Pride in Who We Are, not pride in our titles or our accolades. This is about recognizing our intrinsic worth. The worthiness of our stories just as we are and our power to effect change."

—Deena Fidas (She/Her), Managing Director & Chief Programs and Partnerships Officer, Out & Equal

TELL SOMEONE CHALLENGE

From mass participation workshops to breakout sessions, the resounding theme of the 2023 Southern States Forum was to take pride in our stories and in every aspect of who we are. Whether attendees identified as Queer, or as allies, the consensus was that, in order to truly impact the workplace, employees need to share their stories. And that takes courage, support, and skills-building.

During the closing session, Fidas led the group in a final call to action, encouraging the group to tell someone in their lives with whom they had never discussed LGBTQ+ people, how they spent their day. The "Tell Someone Challenge" is meant to both break the silence around this topic, and to create new openings for dialogue. Deconstructing barriers, while uniting colleagues and communities, one conversation at a time.

AIRBUS FACILITY TOUR

Attendees had the unique opportunity to tour the nearby Airbus manufacturing facility. Upon arriving they were greeted by a huge rainbow Pride flag and moving welcome video from SVP Commercial Aircraft Operations with Airbus America, Daryl Taylor, followed by a two-hour tour of the expansive Airbus Facility.

BE THE CHANGE

Learn more about how you can effect change at your place of business.

Join us at 2023 Workplace Summit

September 11-14 Orlando, Florida

Access the Out & Equal Resource: Your Story. Your Truth. Your Power.