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Unsung Heroes: Udi Behr Sets the Record 'Straight' with Gay Jewelry

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By Duane Wells



Bob Dylan once famously said, "I think of a hero as someone who understands the degree of responsibility that comes with his freedom." By this definition, Love and Pride founder and chief designer **Udi Behr** is a veritable giant among men.

Since launching his Love and Pride collection in 2005, Behr has managed to do what no man, gay or straight, has done before—design and market a collection of jewelry specifically for the gay and lesbian community that benefits the gay and lesbian community.

With a whopping 10-percent of the revenue generated by the Love and Pride collection going to Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund to support marriage equality, in addition to generous donations to other gay and lesbian organizations like the Matthew Shepard Foundation, Behr and his sparkling merchandise have already made a significant financial and political impact on the LGBT community.

Moreover, in very short expanse of time, Behr has woven himself into the very fabric of American gay culture, designing hip jewelry collections for hit gay-themed shows like *The L Word* and *Queer as Folk* and launching signature product lines with gay personalities like **Honey Labrador** and **Reichen Lehmkuhl**. Were Behr a gay man, his level of involvement with the gay community and its welfare would seem an organic affair. The fact that Behr is a straight, married, Jewish father of two makes him exceptional.



Spend five minutes talking with Udi and you'll soon discover that he may well know more about gay and lesbian history than most of the LGBT community at large. His husky accented voice takes on the serious tone of a wizened prophet, while his eyes dance with excitement whenever he talks about the work he does on behalf of same sex marriage.

Amid the animated gesturing which punctuates his passionate discussion about gay and lesbian rights, it becomes clear why Behr not only cares so deeply about LGBT equality, but also why he believes the issue is much bigger than sexuality.

"I'm not only a straight, Jewish father, but I'm also a friend, son, cousin, husband—and a person who cares deeply about the people around me, he explained during a recent conversation.

"More importantly, I believe that the issues of marriage equality and lesbian and gay rights are fundamentally about human rights. We cannot claim to live in a free society if we are not all treated equally under the law. What does it say about our society when we deny fundamental rights to people simply because of who they love? In one word... it's wrong. I am Dutch, Israeli, American, a New Yorker—all a part of the human race whether gay or straight. But, as you pointed out, I am also a father. It is because of my kids and the legacy I want to leave for them that I fight the fight. Teaching and demonstrating with actions about being involved and doing what is right—that's one of the most important things I can do for them."

Doing 'what is right' is precisely what inspired the former Israeli paratrooper turned award winning jewelry designer and philanthropist to launch two of his newest creative efforts. First there's the Love, Peace and Hope Bridal Collection, a line of bridal jewelry for straight couples, 10% of the revenue from which will also benefit Lambda Legal. This latest bridal collection is an extension of Behr's already successful [Love, Peace and Hope](#) line which is sold online and at select Saks Fifth Avenue retail stores around the U.S., and is particularly exemplary of Behr's unflagging commitment to creating enterprises that exist at the intersection of commerce and conscience.

"Love, Peace and Hope [is] for men and who want to get engaged, get married, or renew their vows in a spirit of creating something bigger than the two of them," says Udi.

Behr's other new project, the launch of which he celebrated last month with a big party in New York, a \$20,000 donation to LLDEF and a sea of 1,138 red roses, is a collection that is very close to his heart because of its ability to raise consciousness about gay and lesbian rights.

The line is simply called 1138 to symbolize the number of federal rights denied to same sex couples but granted automatically to straight couples from the moment they say 'I do', as documented by the U.S. General Accounting Office. Behr envisioned the line of stylish necklaces, bracelets and earrings as a way to draw attention to this blatant inequity.

"1138 is a powerful symbol in the fight for marriage equality for all loving couples. Most people have no idea about 1138 and what marriage rights really mean. I want people to start asking questions, says the jewelry designer.

"When I wear my 1138 bracelet, I am constantly asked what the number stands for. This simple question gives me the opportunity to start a conversation and to educate others about marriage equality for all loving couples. I want everyone to wear the number and to start lots of conversations. It is by talking that we educate. It is by educating that we shift the dialogue away from the emotional and religious and bring it to its fundamental point—human rights."

Such is Behr's ongoing mission—to use his talent and his work as a catalyst for change.

"As a jewelry designer, I am using the weapons I have at my disposal—design and passion—to make a fashion, political and social statement," Udi offers matter of factly when asked about the impact of his work. "Social consciousness is more than being 'cool' and doing what's 'in'. It is about doing what's right. We are redefining 'cool'—it is about fashion and about giving back, getting involved and fighting for what you believe in even the smallest ways, because it all adds up. We truly believe in the words Love and Pride and we practice them every day."

Pretty heady stuff to hear nowadays when most of corporate America seems more focused on the bottom line than improving the communities in which they operate and on whose backs their profits are made. More than enough reason to justify designating Mr. Behr a hero, but Udi will have none of it.

"I don't do things to be a hero," says Behr, who counts **Judy Shepard**, **Oskar Schindler** and **Mattie JT Stepanek** amongst his personal list of heroes. "It's flattering, of course, when people say that about me... but it's a point of view of people. My philosophy of life is that I have to be true to myself. I want to do something good for people and if I do that and then I'm a hero to those people... that's what I want."

Well then by his own definition, Bob Dylan's and so many others, Udi is indeed a true hero to the gay and lesbian community—one in whom we can safely invest our collective love and pride, knowing full well that it will be returned in equal measure.