

COMMUNITY



New same-sex commitment rings, designed by renowned jewelry designer Udi Behr, are shown off by Reichen Lehmkuhl, the reality TV star, and his boyfriend Louis Coraggio.

Design Meets Commitment

Jewelry designer Udi Behr pairs with reality TV star Reichen Lehmkuhl on new line of rings

By HANNAH SELIGSON

Udi Behr is an unusual gay rights activist. A straight, married man, Behr, recently named one of the top seven jewelry designers working today, is the owner of a very successful new line, called Love and Pride, a collection of same-sex commitment rings he showed during Olympus Fashion Week in Manhattan last month.

“I was inspired to start this line when I saw Gavin Newsom, the mayor of San Francisco, on “Larry King Live” in March 2004, talking about his courageous act of granting marriage licenses to same-sex couples,” Behr told Gay City News. “I thought to myself that I need to make a gay commitment line.”



And do that he has. Creating innovative designs, Behr has forged unique pieces celebrating the connection between two people using male and female symbols.

As Behr sees it, gay rights and, more specifically, same-sex marriage are not issues that just affect the gay community.

“I look at the issue of gay marriage the same way I looked at ending segregation—it’s a human rights issue,” Behr said.

The designer said he is donating 10 percent of his profits to marriage equality causes.

“Money always helps to raise awareness,” he said.

To promote his line, he has enlisted the help of Reichen Lehmkuhl, the star of the Emmy-award-winning show “The Amazing Race” and of “Kill Reality.” Lehmkuhl and his boyfriend, Louis Coraggio, joined Behr during Fashion Week to celebrate the launch of the new Love and Pride jewelry collection.

Lehmkuhl was drawn to Love and Pride for, among other reasons, its out-of-the-box advertising.

“In its advertising, it shows very feminine women and very masculine men,” he said. “It’s not confining them to gay stereotypes of the past.”

Lehmkuhl, who rose to the rank of captain after attending the Air Force Academy, where he had an affair with another cadet, all the while concealing his identity as a gay man, prides himself on defying stereotypes. He will write about his experiences as a gay officer in the Air Force in his upcoming book “Here’s What We’ll Say” to be published in the fall of 2006.

Lehmkuhl said he believed his credibility later in life would be enhanced if he were able to serve out his term in the Air Force, despite the risks. He admits to times of fear.

“I saw gay cadets disappear and no one would tell us where they went,” he said. “Homosexuality is still a jail-able offense in the United States military.”

His experiences in the Air Force has propelled Lehmkuhl into his current status as a political activist; he serves as a spokesman for the Washington-based Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, which works to lift the ban on openly gay people in the military and to support those affected by it. As Lehmkuhl sees it, it is past time for the U.S. military to embrace a huge part of the culture that exists within it, gay men and lesbians already serving.

“There is still very much a good old boys’ mentality that exists in the military,” he said.

Lehmkuhl, a California resident, expressed anger over what he said was a political betrayal of his community by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, when the Republican vetoed the state’s historic gay marriage law narrowly passed by the Legislature in early September.

“How many gay people in the L.A. entertainment industry have taken Governor Schwarzenegger to where he is?” he asked. “How many gay people have fought for him and stood behind him? It’s absolutely outrageous.”

Behr said he has become impassioned about gay rights on a personal level. It angers him that he doesn’t see more straight people taking a stance on an issue that he sees as such a clear-cut human rights violation.

“Gay couples are missing 1,100 rights that straight people have,” he said, citing a familiar statistic developed by Congress’ General Accounting Office. “There are a lot of rights that we, as straight people, take for granted.”

Behr said that he has encountered surprising instances of resistance in marketing a line that he feels is based in a benign concept.

“I had one store tell they me they were afraid that selling this line would alienate their straight customers,” he said.

But, despite a few hurdles, the jewelry is selling quite well and customers can get it exclusively online at loveandpride.com.

“I don’t have a doubt in my mind that gay marriage will happen in this country. You cannot stop gay marriage,” Behr said. “Look at Spain, a predominantly Catholic country, and it happened there. It gives me hope that it will happen here.”