

In Homophobic Industries, Gay Men Struggle To Blaze A Trail

Sports, construction, and other male-dominated fields remain very unfriendly to gay employees. But a few are working to make things better for everyone. Posted July 13, 2012 by [Anna North](#) - BuzzFeed Staff



Evan Darling has always loved cars, but he entered professional racing in 2007 with a larger goal in mind: he wanted to be a role model for gay teens. When he came out to his parents at age 18, in 1986, they reacted so badly he had to move out. But since then, he'd gone on to build a successful career as a mechanic and landscaper, and he wanted to use his entry into racing as a way to give hope to gay teens and campaign against discrimination. It was a lot harder than he anticipated.

Darling did some high-profile races when he started out, including the NASCAR-owned Grand Am Koni Challenge — but as he told BuzzFeed Shift, "the sponsors just never came." He believes big corporations are afraid to be associated with a gay driver, fearing that sponsoring him would be "too controversial." He's run up against an uncomfortable reality: even as many fields become more gay-friendly, a few — most of them stereotypically male-dominated — are lagging behind.

Openly gay NASCAR driver Evan Darling.
Via: edarlingenterprises.com

"There are very much two Americas when it comes to inclusivity in the workplace," said Kirk Synder, author of *Lavender Road To Success: The Career Guide for the Gay Community*. He said that while finance, technology, and entertainment (behind the scenes at least) had become much more gay-friendly, industries like oil, real estate development, and sports were slow to follow suit. Many oil companies are based in Texas — a state not always [friendly](#) to gay rights — and have bases abroad where the climate is far worse. In some countries where American oil companies operate, you can be killed for being gay. And oil and real estate development companies both often have a "white, male-dominated infrastructure" and lots of employees from rural areas who haven't had the opportunity to meet a lot of openly gay people. And Snyder said he sees similar issues in "any of the blue-collar industries," from plumbing to electrical work.

Mat Wahlstrom, office manager at Roberts Electric Service in San Diego, which explicitly [bills itself](#) as gay-friendly, agrees. "No matter what the trade, to be an openly gay individual in most contracting companies is to be singled out for abuse," he told BuzzFeed. He said multiple gay electricians had applied for work with Roberts after facing discrimination elsewhere.

Gay men in construction can face stereotypes about their abilities, says Seanlai Cochrane, owner of Platinum Roofing and Construction in Edmond, Oklahoma. She runs Platinum as a gay-friendly business, in part because her son is gay, but she told BuzzFeed that discrimination is a problem in the industry as a whole. "These tend to be labor-intensive businesses," she said, "and when you are a gay man, you are viewed as not being able to handle the work."

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A home construction project in Newtown, Pa., 2012.
Construction and other aspects of real estate development may be especially unfriendly to gay workers.

Image by Mel Evans / AP

Continued from other side.

Snyder said athletes, too, can face homophobia from teammates, who may assume a gay player will "hit on them in the shower." But Darling said his bigger problem has been fans. Other drivers, he said, are usually accepting: their attitude is that "when you put on a helmet and race a car it doesn't matter if you're purple or an alien from outer space," as long as you can drive. But from fans and pit crews, he said, he's gotten some "interesting comments." And he's received "more hate emails than good emails" since his entry into the sport.

Many of NASCAR's most loyal fans come from the same demographics Snyder identifies as especially homophobic — white, blue-collar, rural, and male. Joshua I. Newman, author of *Sport, Spectacle, and NASCAR Nation: Consumption and the Cultural Politics of Neoliberalism*, told BuzzFeed that NASCAR and many of its fans identified the sport's "target market" as "white, Southern, Christian, good ol' boys." NASCAR has seen drops in attendance and ticket sales in recent years, and many commentators blame its efforts to move too far outside that market — by, for instance, holding races in Mexico City. Sponsors are now unlikely to support "a driver who deviates (in terms of gender, sexuality, ethnicity) from the sport's norms." (NASCAR did not respond to a request for comment.)

Snyder sees some signs that the country's climate is changing, even in industries most hostile to gay people. He cited Golden State Warriors CEO Rick Welts's [announcement](#) last year that he is gay as a major step forward that could encourage athletes to come out. And he said that younger workers, regardless of field, are far less likely than their older counterparts to be homophobic. Cochrane concurs — she said the stigma against gay people in America is "very much an older stigma." Still, said Snyder, full acceptance for gay employees will require that more high-profile people come out: "you have to talk about it to get to the place where you don't have to talk about it."

Darling has never had a problem talking about his orientation. He has received some messages of support — parents of gay kids have thanked him for coming out, as have closeted members of his own industry. "Those types of things keep me going," he said, "but it's hard to market that." He's taken this year off of racing due to lack of sponsorship — if he's going to race next year, he needs money. To get it, he'll have to convince sponsors to directly challenge the biases of some of their fans — which may not be an easy task.

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