



Gill, Tim (b. 1953)

by Linda Rapp

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The founder of a highly successful computer firm, philanthropist Tim Gill has used his wealth to benefit the glbtq community.

Tim Gill was born on October 18, 1953 in Gary, Indiana, but in the early 1960s his family moved to the Denver, Colorado suburb of Lakewood, where his father established a practice in plastic surgery.

As a youth Gill did not show much athletic talent. He was, he recalled, "always the second-to-last person chosen" for sports teams. His interests lay instead in mathematics, science, and science fiction. At Wheat Ridge High School he joined the chess, physics, and science clubs, where he made friends with other students who were also "committed to the nerdy point of view," as his longtime friend--and fellow club member--Ed Post quipped.

A science club field trip gave Gill his first opportunity to use a computer. He was immediately fascinated. When his school got its own computer, Gill arrived before the school day started and "would stay after class . . . until they kicked me out" in order to work on it.

Post recalled that Gill was an exceptionally quick study and soon began creating complex "programs that most people don't start writing until college now."

Gill, who had considered following his father into medicine, decided instead to pursue a degree in applied mathematics and computer science at the University of Colorado.

As an incoming student Gill received a packet of orientation materials that included a copy of the student newspaper, in which he noticed an ad for a gay and lesbian student group.

Upon reading the ad, Gill later remarked, "I became immediately happy." He wasted no time in making contact with the group, going to their office on his second day on campus.

"I just said, 'Hi, hello,' and then I shook for ten minutes," he commented of his first step out of the closet.

Gill came out to his mother in a phone call some three months later. His parents, conservative Republicans, took the news hard. His mother became depressed and sought psychiatric treatment. His father drove to the Boulder campus to visit his son and suggested that Gill should see a psychiatrist as well.

At the time, 1972, the American Psychiatric Association still listed homosexuality as a mental disorder. Fortunately, the doctor that Gill consulted did not consider "curing" him the only option. Gill recalls the therapist saying, "If you want to change, I'll help you change. But otherwise we'll have to work on your parents."

Gill chose the latter course, with happy results. His mother eventually came to view the experience of her

son's coming out as "a blessing because I learned something about myself." She returned to college and earned a master's degree in counseling. Both she and Gill's father joined Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG).

Gill's two younger sisters immediately accepted the fact that he was gay, and the computer nerds, reported Post, were unfazed by the news.

Gill excelled at his computer science studies at the university. Exempted from basic courses, he went directly into upper-level and graduate classes.

Gill, who had been earning money writing computer programs since his high school graduation, took a job with a high-tech firm, ALF, upon receiving his college degree in 1977. When ALF ran into financial difficulties in 1981, he borrowed \$2,000 from his parents to co-found his own company, Quark, with a friend, Mark Pope.

The company had great success with its desktop publishing programs, but the introduction of a line of external hard drives a few years later was a fiasco, costing the company approximately a million dollars. Gill and Pope had to let go half of their workforce of about forty people, which Gill called a "horrific" experience.

To reorganize the enterprise, in 1986 Gill and Pope enlisted another partner, Fred Ebrahimi, who had a stronger background in business. Pope eventually sold his share of the company to the other two. With Ebrahimi at the helm for business operations and Gill in charge of technology, Quark burgeoned. Gill made millions and twice appeared on the Forbes 400 list of the country's wealthiest people.

In 1992 Colorado voters passed Amendment 2, which banned laws designed to protect glbtq people from discrimination. (The measure was struck down by the United States Supreme Court in 1996.) Gill was among those dismayed by the success of the ballot initiative, and he resolved to take action. He went to work on organizing a foundation to benefit the glbtq community and also began speaking out publicly as a gay man-- a difficult task for the self-described "pathological introvert."

Gill established the Gill Foundation with a million dollars in 1994. He continued to increase its financial worth, especially after he sold his interest in Quark to Ebrahimi in 2000. By the end of 2004 the Gill Foundation's endowment stood at 220 million dollars.

The Gill Foundation, named by the Association of Fundraising Professionals as the Foundation of the Year in 2004, has numerous educational, cultural, political, and other projects. More than 67 million dollars' worth of grants were awarded in the Foundation's first decade. It is now the leading funder of glbtq organizations and causes.

Among its multifarious bequests, the Gill Foundation has established scholarships for gay and lesbian students at several colleges, donated to AIDS hospices and other programs, and given grants to institutions such as the Human Rights Campaign and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

A grant from the Gill Foundation was integral to the development of the extremely successful Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). Its executive director, Kevin Jennings, praised Gill's work, saying, "The gay community in its current form could not exist without Tim. He created the infrastructure of national organizations like mine, and also in out-of-the-way places where gay community centers never existed before."

In order to qualify for Gill Foundation grants, organizations must have or adopt nondiscrimination policies that include language regarding sexual orientation and must also publicly acknowledge the receipt of money from the Foundation's Gay and Lesbian Fund of Colorado.

While the bulk of the Foundation's grants go to glbtq causes, some are awarded to other entities such as libraries, children's charities, and arts organizations. Gill feels that it is important to make "straight folks aware that the organizations they know and love also get gay support."

The Gill Foundation's political programs include the Democracy Project ("a non-partisan effort to help organizations serving lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and their allies raise more money, lobby more effectively, strengthen relationships with supporters, and build alliances with other organizations") and TurnOut ("a project . . . that seeks to educate friends and family of lesbians, gay, bisexual, and transgender people as to the basic inequalities faced by their loved ones on a daily basis and empower them to take action to voice their concern").

Gill and his partner, Scott Miller, reside in Aspen, Colorado but have also traveled extensively, often with outdoor sports on the agenda. Despite his unpromising start in high school, Gill has become quite an athlete and enjoys snowboarding, paragliding, canoeing, and mountain climbing.

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About the Author

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