

## Everyone Should Have a Hero

As a male coming of age in the Anita Bryant dominated era of the middle 1970s in South Florida, one had to learn to ignore a lot of media junk. Having been raised in a relatively conservative Catholic household, the words Bryant used -- stung on many levels.

I for one -- knew exactly who and what I was since I was 10 or 11. My attraction was towards other males, females simply seemed alien to me. I took refuge in reading books – a biography, world history, fiction, science-fiction, and non-fiction all were of interest and allowed for a certain degree of escape. The reading allowed for me to start to develop a list of ‘heroes’ – Thomas Edison, Helen Keller, Alexander the Great, and others became important to my value system. Little did I know that in 1978 I would be adding a rather unlikely personal hero to that list. All of those other thoughts & desires remained buried while attending Catholic high school, until I left South Florida for college a comfortable distance away from my family’s eyes. Visits home of course continued during the college years and only slightly tapered off as I established myself in my career. I have grown to call Central Florida home after nearly 40 years.

November 27, 1978 is very vivid in my memory even after 37 years. Not even 20 years old, the news account of the death of Harvey Milk struck a heavy blow to my being. I had been aware of the rise of Milk for a number of years as I had followed the developing scene in San Francisco. In him I saw hope of a better tomorrow. This was a historic individual who was cut down in his prime by an individual ruled by the same misguided beliefs that Anita Bryant so viciously – and vocally spread.

Harvey Milk was the genesis of what was to come as the equal rights movement gained traction and cohesion during the 1990s and the years to follow.

Born on Long Island in 1930, Milk graduated from high school and entered the U.S. Navy during the Korean War. He served as diving officer and later as a diving instructor at the Naval Station located in San Diego. Discharged in 1955, he wandered through a series of jobs until moving to San Francisco and settling in the Castro District in 1972. Here he seemed to have found a potential home. The wild bohemian atmosphere of the Castro suited Harvey well at this point in his life. In 1973 Harvey in partnership with his boyfriend, Scott Smith opened Castro Cameras, which would become a base for his future political activities.

Milk’s adventure into the world of local politics was rocky at best. His desire to make a difference unsettled the long established political figures of the era. Inexperienced in the ways of the political machine he lost his first election campaign in 1973. Regrouping and cleaning up his image – his run in 1975 for Supervisor



ended in a 10<sup>th</sup> place finish out of a field of 32. Again he had failed. However his public image and political cachet was much improved as he was often referred to as the “Mayor of Castro Street”. Milk was becoming a political force to be reckoned with.

The election of George Moscone in 1975 opened the door to his appointment to the Board of Permit Appeals in 1976, making him the first openly gay city commissioner in the United States. Milk spent only five weeks on the Board of Permit Appeals before Moscone was forced to fire him when he announced he would run for the California State Assembly.

The media stature of Milk received a big boost in 1975. On September 22, 1975, President Gerald Ford, while visiting San Francisco was nearly assassinated by Sara Jane Moore. A former Marine who had been walking by grabbed her arm as the gun discharged toward the pavement. The bystander was Oliver "Bill" Sipple, a quite unassuming gay man who was not totally out of the closet. Sipple wanted nothing to do with being called a “hero” and did everything possible to disappear from the news. The connection to Milk was soon discovered (through an ex-lover of Milks) and the media frenzy ensued.

Anita Bryant's public campaign in South Florida opposing homosexuality and the multiple challenges to gay rights ordinances across the United States fueled gay politics in San Francisco. The next election day -- November 8, 1977, Milk won by 30% against sixteen other candidates.

In a clever play on Anita Bryant's fire-brand slogan --“Save the Children”, Milk adopted the phrase "My name is Harvey Milk—and I want to recruit you." He used it often to introduce himself and to make his point clearly.

In one of those strange connections in life I have an acquaintance who was a personal witness to some of the events on Castro Street during this time period. She recalled the following, “I remember being in the office on Castro St. and the energy and love and HOPE that it was filled with, even thinking we could get an outed person into office at that time.”

I clearly remember reading in the newspaper Milk's swearing-in -- as he became the first non-incumbent openly gay man in the United States to win an election for public office.

Milk's energy and affinity for thumbing his nose at the establishment -- at times exasperated Board of Supervisors President Dianne Feinstein. He was bound and determined to make a difference and would take no prisoners in the process. Supervisor Milk's driven nature earned the strong dislike of one of his fellow Supervisors. The name Dan White would become well known.

Milk was not even a year into his term, when Dan White on November 27, 1978 assassinated him and Mayor George Moscone. White had managed to evade the security at City Hall by

crawling in through an open basement window. The profoundly shaken Dianne Feinstein announced what had happened to a bewildered crowd. Milk was 48, Moscone was 49.

That evening, as the folks of the Castro processed the events of the day, a spontaneous gathering began to form, moving toward City Hall in a candlelight vigil. Their numbers were estimated between 25,000 and 40,000 –which is a testament to the influence and respect earned by Milk.

The trial of Dan White resulted in an acquittal on first degree murder but a conviction on voluntary manslaughter stuck. The ploy of using the legal defense known as diminished capacity caused by junk food – also known as the “Twinkie Defense” was widely ridiculed. White served a little over 5 years of the sentence and was released. The troubled nature of White’s mental health resulted in his suicide in October of 1985. White’s death while noted in the popular press; a sense of finality seemed to greet the news. Few tears – if any -- were shed for White.

The legacy of Harvey Milk has been seen in numerous ways. Time Magazine included him in the 100 Heroes and Icons of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as did The Advocate place him 3<sup>rd</sup> in the list of 40 Heroes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In August 2009, President Obama posthumously awarded Milk the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his contribution to the gay rights movement stating "he fought discrimination with visionary courage and conviction". Milk's nephew Stuart accepted for his uncle.

On May 22, 2014 – nearly 36 years after his death, the USPS issued a Forever postage stamp honoring Harvey Milk. He was the first openly gay political official to receive this distinctive honor. The stamp features a photo taken in front of Milk's Castro Camera store and was unveiled on what would have been his 84<sup>th</sup> birthday.

