

The Official HARVEY MILK Biography

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OFFICIAL BIOGRAPHY OF HARVEY MILK



Harvey Milk, was a visionary civil and human rights leader who became one of the first openly gay elected officials in the United States when he won a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977. Milk's unprecedented loud and unapologetic proclamation of his authenticity as an openly gay candidate for public office, and his subsequent election gave never before experienced hope to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered (LGBT) people everywhere at a time when the community was encountering widespread hostility and discrimination. His remarkable career was tragically cut short when he was assassinated nearly a year after taking office.

Harvey was born May 22, 1930, in Woodmere, New York. Harvey and his one sibling, Robert, worked in the family's department store, "Milks"; his Lithuanian born father, William, served in the U.S. Navy and as did his spirited, independent mother Minerva, also of Lithuanian heritage, who was a "Yeomanette" during World War I. Harvey came from a small middle-class Jewish

family that had founded a Jewish synagogue and was well known in the New York “Litvaks” community for their civic engagement. He knew he was gay by the time he attended Bayshore high school, where he was a popular student with wide-ranging interests, from opera to playing football.

While in college at New York State College for Teachers (now State University of New York) in Albany, where he studied math and history, Milk penned a popular weekly student newspaper column where he began questioning issues of diversity with a reflection on the lessons learned from the recently ended World War. He graduated in 1951 and enlisted in the Navy. He attended Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island, and subsequently was based in San Diego, where he served as a diving instructor. In 1955, he resigned at the rank of lieutenant junior grade after being officially questioned about his sexual orientation.

Following his time in the Navy, Milk entered the civilian working world in New York, as a public school teacher on Long Island, as a stock analyst in New York City, and as a production associate for Broadway musicals, including Jesus Christ Superstar and Hair. During the 1960s and early 70s, he became more actively involved in politics and advocacy and he demonstrated against the Vietnam War.

Late 1972, Milk moved to San Francisco, where he opened a camera store on Castro Street, in the heart of the city’s growing gay community. It quickly became a neighborhood center. Milk’s sense of humor and theatricality made him a popular figure. Little more than a year after his arrival in the city, he declared his candidacy for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. He lost that race, but emerged from the campaign as a force to be reckoned with in local politics.

After some area merchants tried to prevent two gay men from opening a store, Milk and a few other business owners founded the Castro Village Association, a first in the nation organizing of predominantly LGBT businesses, with Milk as president. He organized the Castro Street Fair in 1974 to attract more customers to area businesses. Its success made the Castro Village Association an effective power base for gay merchants and a blue print for other LGBT communities in the US.

In 1975, he ran again for the combined San Francisco City/County supervisor seat and narrowly lost. By now, he was established as the leading political spokesman for the Castro’s vibrant gay community. His close friend and ally Mayor George Moscone, appointed him to the city’s Board of Permit Appeals, making Milk the first openly gay city commissioner in the United States.

Milk soon filed candidacy papers for the state assembly, but lost his race to represent the Sixteenth Assembly District. Realizing that he would have a greater chance of political success if he relied on voters in the Castro, he then worked with his campaign manager, Anne Kronenberg and Mayor Moscone for the passage of an amendment that would replace at-large elections for the Board of Supervisors with district elections. In 1977, he easily won his third bid,

and was inaugurated as a San Francisco City-County Supervisor on January 9, 1978. This was an important and symbolic victory for the LGBT community as well as a personal triumph for Milk. His election made national and international headlines.

A commitment to serving a broad constituency, not just LGBT people, helped make Milk an effective and popular supervisor. His ambitious reform agenda included protecting gay rights—he sponsored an important anti-discrimination bill—as well as establishing day care centers for working mothers, the conversion of military facilities in the city to low-cost housing, reform of the tax code to attract industry to deserted warehouses and factories, and other issues. He was a powerful advocate for strong, safe neighborhoods, and pressured the mayor's administration to improve services for the Castro such as library services, and community policing. In addition, he spoke out on state and national issues of interest to LGBT people, women, racial and ethnic minorities and other marginalized communities

One of these was a California ballot initiative, Proposition 6, which would have mandated the firing of gay teachers in the state's public schools. State Senator John Briggs, seeking to marshal anti-gay sentiment and an agenda of hate and diminishment for political gain, spearheaded the initiative. With strong, effective opposition from Milk and others, it was defeated at a time when other political attacks on gay people were being successfully waged around the US.

Attendance swelled at gay pride marches in San Francisco and Los Angeles as Milk and others campaigned against the Briggs Initiative.

In one of his eloquent speeches, Milk spoke of the American ideal of equality, proclaiming, "Gay people, we will not win our rights by staying quietly in our closets. ... We are coming out to fight the lies, the myths, the distortions. We are coming out to tell the truths about gays, for I am tired of the conspiracy of silence, so I'm going to talk about it. And I want you to talk about it. You must come out."

Many other qualities in addition to his eloquence made Milk a successful politician and leader. He pioneered the building of coalitions between diverse groups—women, asians, hispanics, the disabled—and even brought together the teamsters and gay bar owners—in return for a pledge from the teamsters to hire more gay drivers, Milk asked bar owners to stop selling beer from certain distributors while drivers were striking.

On November 27, 1978, a disgruntled former city Supervisor assassinated Milk and Mayor George Moscone. Dan White sneaked into City Hall through a basement window, avoiding the metal detectors at the official entrances, went to Moscone's office, killed him, then walked down the hall to kill Milk. That night, a crowd of thousands spontaneously came together on Castro Street and marched to City Hall in a silent candlelight vigil that has been recognized as one of the most eloquent responses to violence that a community has ever expressed.

Given the hatred directed at gay people in general and Milk in particular—he received daily death threats—he was aware of the likelihood that he may well be assassinated. He recorded several versions of his will, “to be read in the event of my assassination.” One of his tapes contained the now-famous statement, “If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door.” His nephew, Stuart Milk, a teenager at the time, and close with his uncle, came out, along with countless others across the nation, on the day his uncle was killed. Shortly after Milk’s death, people marching for gay rights in Washington, D.C., chanted “Harvey Milk lives!”

Dan White, Milk’s assassin, was acquitted of murder charges and given a mild sentence for manslaughter, partly as a result of what became known as the “twinkie defense.” His attorney claimed that White had eaten too much junk food on the day of the killings and thus could not be held accountable for his crimes. He was sentenced to less than eight years in prison on May 21, 1979—the day before what would have been Milk’s 49th birthday—igniting what came to be known as the White Night Riots. Enraged citizens stormed City Hall and rows of police cars were set on fire. The city suffered property damage and police officers retaliated by raiding the Castro, vandalizing gay businesses and beating people on the street.

The life and career of Harvey Milk have been the subjects of an opera, books, and films. These include the Shilts’s biography, *The Mayor of Castro Street* (1982); the Oscar-winning documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk* by Robert Epstein (1984); and the Gus Van Sant directed drama *Milk* (2008). The latter film received eight Academy Award nominations, winning in two categories: Sean Penn was named best actor for his performance in the title role, and Dustin Lance Black won an Oscar for his screenplay.

There are several public schools named after Milk, the Harvey Milk High School in New York City and in his old Castro neighborhood, the elementary school bears his name. In San Francisco, there is a federal building at the US Job Corps Center on Treasure Island named after Milk, as well as a public recreation center, a branch of the public library, and a public plaza. A memorial plaque reads, “His life is an inspiration to all people committed to equal opportunity and an end to bigotry.” In 2012, San Diego, California named the street that leads to the doors of that city’s LGBT center Harvey Milk Street and the City of Long Beach, California dedicated the Harvey Milk Oceanside Promenade and Park. Abroad, the gay community center in the city of Verona, Italy is named after Milk as is the LGBT center in Anuncion Paraguay. Harvey was included in *Time* magazine’s list of the “100 most important people of the 20th century.”

A statue of Milk was unveiled in the center rotunda at San Francisco City Hall in 2008. On August 12, 2009, Harvey’s nephew, Stuart Milk accepted the posthumously awarded Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama, who praised Milk’s “visionary courage and conviction” in fighting discrimination. Stuart Milk also accepted Harvey’s induction into the California Hall of Fame in 2009 from then First Lady Maria Kennedy Shriver. A bill designating Milk’s birthday, May 22, as an annual “Harvey Milk Day” was introduced by Senator Mark Leno and championed by Harvey’s nephew, Stuart Milk and Equality California – the non-fiscal Milk holiday was passed by the

California State Legislature in 2009 and signed into law by then Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. Milk's day is observed with events across the nation and around the globe. In 2014, the White House, the United States Postal Service and the Harvey Milk Foundation hosted a historic first day of issuance ceremony at the White House for the USPS Harvey Milk Forever Stamp, marking the first time that an openly LGBT official has joined the limited number of "great and accomplished Americans to grace the corner of an envelope and represent the US to the world".

Harvey Milk believed that government should represent individuals, not just downtown interests, and should insure equality for all citizens while providing needed services. He spoke for the participation of LGBT people and other minorities in the political process. The more gay people came out of the closet, he believed, the more their families and friends would support protections for their equal rights. In the years since Milk's assassination, public opinion has shifted on gay marriage, gays in the military, and other issues, and there have been hundreds of openly LGBT public officials in America, yet the work continues. The Harvey Milk Foundation, established by his nephew, Stuart Milk, and Anne Kronenberg, his campaign manager and aide, is dedicated to realizing his vision of equality and authenticity for everyone, everywhere.