**Harvey Milk, Hero and Martyr**

(May 22, 1930 - November 27, 1978)



Inauguration Day for Mayor Moscone and Supervisor Milk at City Hall
- Rink

For an entire community, Harvey Milk is remembered as a hero, a martyr to a cause.

After three unsuccessful campaigns, Harvey Milk was elected to the San Francisco County Board of Supervisors. His election was a landmark event. The reason? Harvey Milk was gay, and his election was the first of an openly gay elected official in the United States. To win the election, Milk had to gain the support of all segments of his district. On election night, Harvey Milk reminded his supporters: "This is not my victory -- it's yours. If a gay man can win, it proves that there is hope for all minorities who are willing to fight."

Harvey Milk was born in 1930 in Woodmere, Long Island, New York. He graduated from New York College for Teachers, served four years in the US Navy, taught high school mathematics and history on Long Island and worked in finance in New York City. When he moved to San Francisco in 1972, he opened a camera store on Castro Street.

Milk's friends and associates remember him as an outgoing person with a keen sense of humor. A brilliant speaker and neighborhood leader, he was soon referred to as "the Mayor of Castro Street." He entered San Francisco politics by campaigning for supervisor as an openly gay candidate in 1973; he lost but won an impressive 17,000 votes. Milk then established the Castro Village Association of local merchants. He ran for supervisor in 1975 and lost again but Mayor George Moscone appointed Milk to the Board of Permit Appeals, making him the first openly gay commissioner in the country.

In 1977, after district elections replaced citywide elections, Milk ran again for the post of supervisor and won. The first openly gay elected official, he was aware of the tremendous discrimination and prejudice that confronted gays and lesbians. Under his urging, the city council passed a Gay Rights Ordinance in 1978 that protected gays from being fired from their jobs. Milk championed the cause of those with little power against downtown corporations and real estate developers, campaigning especially hard for the rights of senior citizens.

Milk knew that his position as a San Francisco Supervisor advocating gay rights placed him in danger. Hate mail began to pour into his office. With chilling foresight Milk made a tape recording on November 18, 1977, with instructions to have it read only if he died by assassination. In it he says, "If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door." On November 27, 1978, Supervisor Milk and Mayor Moscone were assassinated by Dan White, a former police officer who had clashed with Milk over gay issues. After shooting the mayor, White entered Milk's office and shot him five times at his desk.

At the trial, White's attorney used the "Twinkie" defense -- that too much junk food affected White's reasoning abilities. The jury found him guilty of voluntary manslaughter. He was sentenced to seven years, eight months for the two murders. Many San Franciscans were outraged at his light sentence. Demonstrations at City Hall erupted into riots on May 21, 1979 (the eve of what would have been Milk's 49th birthday), which became known as "White Night."

Harvey Milk left a legacy. He profoundly influenced gay and lesbian politics, and was also a champion of human rights. Milk once said, "...you've got to keep electing gay people...to know there is better hope for tomorrow. Not only for gays, but for blacks, Asians, the disabled, our senior citizens and us. Without hope, we give up. I know you cannot live on hope alone, but without it life is not worth living. You and you and you have got to see that the promise does not fade." His martyrdom is a painful reminder of the length and difficulty of the journey to freedom.

**An Elegy To Dispel Gloom**

**(After the assassinations of Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk in San Francisco, Nov. 1978)**

Let us not sit upon the ground
and tell sad stories
of the death of sanity.
Two humans made of flesh
are meshed in death
and no more need be said.
It is pure vanity
to think that all humanity
be bathed in red
because one young mad man
one so bad man
lost his head.
The force that through the red fuze
drove the bullet
does not drive everyone
through the City of Saint Francis
where there's a breathless hush
in the air today
a hush at City Hall
and a hush at the Hall of Justice
a hush in Saint Francis Wood
where no bird tries to sing
a hush on the Great Highway
and in the great harbor
upon the great ships
and on the Embarcadero
from the Mission Rock
to the Eagle Cafe
a hush on the great red bridge
a hush in the Outer Mission
and at Hunter's Point
a hush at a hot potato stand on Pier 39
and a hush at the People's Temple
tries its wings
a hush and a weeping
at the Convent of the Sacred Heart
on Upper Broadway
a hush upon the fleshpots
of Lower Broadway
a pall upon the punk rock
at Mabuhay Gardens
and upon the cafes and bookstores
of old North Beach
a hush upon the landscape
of the still wild West
where two sweet dudes are dead
and no more need be said.
Do not sit upon the ground and speak
of other senseless murderings
or worse disasters waiting
in the wings.
Do not sit upon the ground and talk
of the death of things beyond
these sad sad happenings.
Such men as these do rise above
our worst imaginings.

**Lawrence Ferlinghetti: These Are My Rivers**.

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