

Gay Rights Activists: Harvey Milk

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Harvey Milk filling in as San Francisco mayor for a day, 1978. Wikimedia Commons

Synopsis: Harvey Milk made history when he was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977. A gay rights activist and community leader, he was one of the first openly gay officials in the United States. Milk was tragically shot and killed less than a year after taking office. Numerous books and films have been made about his life.

Early Years

Harvey Milk was born on May 22, 1930, in Woodmere, New York. One of two boys born to William and Minerva Milk, he grew up in a small, middle-class Jewish family. As a young man, Milk played football and sang at Bay Shore High School and also worked at his family's department store, Milk's.

Milk graduated from the New York State College for Teachers in 1951. He went on to join the U.S. Navy, serving as a diving instructor at a base in San Diego, California. After leaving the Navy in 1955, Milk moved to New York City, where he worked as a teacher and a banker, among other jobs.

New Life In San Francisco

In late 1972, Milk moved to San Francisco, California. There, he opened a camera shop called Castro Camera. The shop was located on Castro Street, which served as the heart of the city's gay community during the 1970s.

Milk had known that he was gay since he was a teenager. However, he did not get involved in the gay rights movement until later in life. As Castro Camera became a neighborhood center, Milk found his voice as a leader and activist. In 1973, he decided to run for a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, which helps to govern the city and county of San Francisco. Milk lost the election but resolved to try again. Two years later, he narrowly lost a second election for the same seat. By then, Milk had become an outspoken leader in the gay community, and was known to many as the "Mayor of Castro Street." His powerful political connections included San Francisco Mayor George Moscone.

In 1977, Milk finally won a seat on the Board of Supervisors. He took office on January 9, 1978. Milk was the city's first openly gay officer as well as one of the first openly gay individuals to be elected to office in the United States. As a city official, he hoped to tackle a variety of issues in addition to gay rights, including child care and housing.

Assassination

Milk's election to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors came at an important time for the gay community. At the time, many doctors still considered homosexuality a mental illness, and the U.S. government did little to protect gay people from unfair treatment. In San Francisco, however, the gay rights movement had made some significant progress. The city's mayor, Moscone, had worked to end local laws that discriminated against gay people. He had also appointed several gay and lesbian officials to important positions within San Francisco.

Not all members of the city government supported the mayor's efforts. Dan White, a member of the Board of Supervisors and former police officer, opposed the gay rights movement, believing it was causing a breakdown of traditional values.

White resigned from the Board of Supervisors in 1978. He later changed his mind and asked Moscone to reappoint him to the board, but the mayor refused. The decision angered White, who was convinced that Moscone and Milk were harming the city of San Francisco.

On November 27, 1978, White entered City Hall with a loaded .38 revolver. He avoided the building's metal detectors by entering through a basement window. He first approached Moscone, and when the mayor again refused to reappoint White to the board, White shot and killed him. White then assassinated Milk. Soon after, he turned himself in at the police station where he used to work.

White's Trial

During White's trial, his lawyers claimed that White had killed Milk and Moscone because he was struggling with mental illness. As proof of his poor mental state, they told the court that White had stopped eating a healthy diet and started eating junk food such as Twinkies snack cakes.

White's lawyers' unusual argument, famously known as the "Twinkie defense," succeeded. At the end of the trial, a jury found White guilty of voluntary manslaughter, a less serious crime than murder. White went on to serve just six years in prison. After the trial, protesters clashed with police in what became known as the "White Night Riots."

In the years since his assassination, Milk's influence as a leader and pioneer has endured. Numerous books and films have been made about his life, including the 2008 film "Milk" starring Sean Penn.