

# The mayor of castro street



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“ The Mayor of Castro Street” The Legacy of Harvey Milk The Mayor of Castro Street, The Life and Times of Harvey Milk was the perfect biography to choose for this project. It not only tells the story of his life and short, radical political career, it also tells of the aftermath of his death, and what it meant to so many people. The most noted gay movement before the 1970’s and 80’s U. S. movement was in pre-World War II Germany. H. Lucas Ginn states that there were more gay bars and periodicals in 1920 Berlin, the capitol of Gay Germany, than there were in 1980 New York.

This movement was of course squashed by the Nazi persecutions. The bravery and gumption to participate in another such movement, one for people for who are cruelly considered fruits or dykes, this time in America, fell in part to Harvey Milk. During a battle to stop a proposition in California that would investigate and fire all possible homosexual teachers, Harvey Milk wrote these verses: “ I can be killed with ease, I can be cut right down, But I cannot fall back into my closet, I have grown, I am not by myself, I am too many, I am all of us” (Shilts 287). He has become a symbol of hope for all minorities.

His constant mantra was always “ You gotta give them hope” (Cloud 1). Instead of being simply a liberal, he always focused on bettering society brick by brick by campaigning for the things that he knew needed to be fixed. He considered gays who only supported their liberal friends weak, and fought simply for his own ideals, not for his political party (Shilts 80). Harvey Milk affected the course of gay history, and ultimately furthered the ideal of civil rights and complete equality for all people. The author, Randy Shilts,

was also a homosexual and was one of the first openly gay journalists hired at a major newspaper.

So technically, this book is written from a biased perspective. But this isn't really an issue. True logic can't be found in these complex social relationships, so it should only be the persecuted who get to tell the story. Well, at least their story should be respected the most. As a gay man, Randy Shilts is fully qualified to relate the events so close to his heart. He died of AIDS in 1994. The book focuses on the progression of gay intolerance and gay history as well as Harvey's life, first as a drifting homosexual, then as an upstanding politician. Such historical events as the Stonewall Riot in New York and the closing of the Black Cat Gay bar in San Francisco are editorialized. Harvey was born in 1930 to heterosexual parents, with one older brother, who he was estranged from him because of his sexuality for the duration of his life. It was only after his death that Robert Milk would claim Harvey as his brother. Presumably this is because he didn't want bad press. As a youth, he acted quite normal, though he knew he was gay at the age of fourteen. "Harvey Milk would strain, sweat, and wrestle to keep the difference a secret only a few could know" (Shilts 3). People thought him a nice, funny guy.

Most people never suspected what he would become. He never came out to his parents, he kept it a secret from the mother he loved and the father he was trying to make proud, or at least not ashamed. He knew the fear that all homosexuals knew in those times. "The constant fear of the loose phrase, the wrong pronoun, the chance moment, the misspoken word that might give it all away (Shilts 29). Police brutality was so common that most

ordinary people thought that it was just part of society. Cop cars would drive slowly down streets and find a man sashaying, minding his own business.

They'd call him ' faggot' and beat him to within an inch of his life. Most policemen were never reprimanded. Plainclothes cops would stake out movie theaters, just waiting for a slight hint of something ' fruity' to arrest or sentence to prison. Months after his high school graduation, Milk joined the navy where he covertly continued his homosexual activities that he had taken part in since he realized he was gay. He served as a diving officer on a submarine. It was in the navy that he met the plastic surgeon that would operate on Milk's nose to make him appear less Jewish.

As a gay Jew, it was only a matter of time before Milk would use his incredible talents and heroism to stand up for those who were terrified. After he was discharged, he moved to the gay-friendlier Big Apple. There he worked as a stockbroker, still keeping his sexuality a secret while living with another man. Milk would have numerous boyfriends throughout his life, never dating anyone over the age of 27. Soon he quit his job and took on a longhaired, scruffy hippie persona. He moved to San Francisco, further proving he was moving away from his once conservative ideas.

Harvey and his lover opened a camera store in the Castro neighborhood. The local and citywide problems soon brought Harvey to run for district supervisor. He would run a total of 4 times, winning only on his last campaign. He focused on the needs of minorities and getting the city's money away from the downtown businesses. His wide interests made him popular with the labor unions and the large population of Latinos and

Chinese Americans. He carried an ultimate goal of civil rights, but he always had the rights of his gay kinsmen in mind.

He stated in his political will that he recorded before his assassination: “ I think I was always part of the movement. And I think that. I wish I had time to explain almost everything I did. Almost everything that was done was done with an eye on the gay movement” (Shilts 373). Harvey always had a presentiment that he would die early and violently. He frequently told this to close friends, who felt chilled at the prospect. “ I’ve known it since I was a kid, I’ll never make it to fifty. There’s just something sinister down the road. I don’t know what it is, but it’s there” (Shilts 35).

He was 48 when he died. When he won his 4th election, Harvey immediately began to act on his political agenda, which was synonymous with his moral agenda. He got a gay civil rights law passed, which was a huge step toward equality. It was widely publicized and got people talking about a subject which had been politely avoided before. People began to see him not as the gay supervisor, but simply as a man with his own ideas, which is what Milk wanted. He wanted to see gays being accepted as normal human beings. Anti-gay Supervisor Dan White had it out for Harvey.

As soon Milk opposed a proposition that White wanted passed, he never forgave him. White voted against anything that would remotely help the gay community. At first Harvey said Dan was a good guy, and could be ‘ educated’ to see things his way. But when White began acting strange, he stated, “ That man is dangerous” (Shilts 257). White resigned from his seat as supervisor, claiming the salary was too low and that he needed to take

care of his wife and baby. He was under enormous amounts of stress. Days later he retracted this and asked for his seat back.

Harvey opposed this, saying the Mayor would have to assign someone else. Harvey wanted another liberal on the board so his issues could be passed. Mayor Moscone, being a liberal himself, agreed. When White heard the news, he took a gun through a window at City Hall, avoiding the metal detectors. He saw the Mayor and raised voices were heard, four shots rang out, and suddenly chaos was set in motion. “ He had special bullets for his next task; the hollow-headed dum-dum bullets that explode on impact, ripping a hole into the victim two or three times the size of the slug itself” (Shilts 268).

White then went to find Harvey Milk, who he blamed for his whole predicament. On November 27, 1978, at 10: 55 AM, Harvey was murdered. Five bullets entered his body. The first three were not fatal, but the fourth bullet caused shards of bone to explode into Harvey’s brain, killing him instantaneously. Once the coroner finished his autopsy, he removed the dead eyes to be replaced into that of the living (Shilts 282). This is symbolic of the legacy Milk left behind. Even while dead, people could see through his eyes and envision the world in his crazy, free-spirited way.

White served a sentence of only five years, a verdict that led to the coining of the slang, “ Twinkie defense. ” White had apparently been eating a lot of junk food before he committed the murders, which his lawyers claimed contributed to his depression. The jury that came to the verdict was mostly white, middle to upper-class, just like their old pal Dan White. No minorities were part of the decisions. Plus the prosecution presented White’s confession

tape, which served the opposite of its purpose by bringing some of the jury members to sympathetic tears. Two years after White served his sentence he committed suicide.

He remains to this day one of the most hated men in San Francisco. The unofficial mayor of Castro Street has become one of my heroes through reading this book and doing this research. Not only was he an activist, he also had an amazing sense of humor that he used in the face of any controversy. When shaking the hand of an anti-gay woman who was lobbying against gay rights, he told her he was surprised she was shaking his hand. She asked why, surprised. “ Because you don’t know where it’s been. ” This was said during a public appearance. He used the most logical arguments against bigots and fundamentalists.

And when people would contradict themselves, use blatant hyperbole, or just ignore what he was saying, he would simply laugh. My only exposure to this remarkable man before this project was a half-remembered viewing of the 2008 film Milk; it’s prime attraction being the sex scenes to most people. While it’s true he had a very active sex life, his politics and his ideas are what make him such a legend and role model for not just for the gay community, but also for anyone who believes in civil rights. He used campaign slogans such as “ You can help turn the pages of history that much faster” (Shilts 370).

He had a scope of vision that saw so much farther than most people. He knew that it was time to act, and he knew he might have to give up his life for doing it. Certain parts of this book have changed me. Harvey said and did

many amazing, funny, and stark things. He managed to convince dozens of old ladies to volunteer in his campaigns. He thought winning over one person to register to vote was more heartening than any optimistic voting polls. Reading about police brutality and the mistreatment of gays has changed me simply through my horror and aversion to it.

Robert Hillsborough was murdered for simply walking down the street, his arm around another man. “ Blood stained his hand, spurted into the streets and still he sank his blade into the fallen man; fifteen times he lashed out, sinking the steel into flesh, shouting ‘ Faggot, faggot, faggot’” (Shilts 163). The gay community went through tremendous upheaval before my birth, but the growth and blossoming into a free and understanding attitude can now be seen; it’s tangible even in my own opinions and words. I am, in a way, a child of Harvey Milk.

Nothing can be changed in this book, or in history that would make the outcome better. Everything Harvey did was so carefully planned and weighed that if he did one thing differently, the whole Gay Movement could have been compromised. The fact that it was Dan White, who was slightly insane, and had access to Harvey, makes it hard to find something Milk had done wrong. He made White an enemy by simply protecting the movement that he stood for, not something to blame him for. The night of the assassinations, there was a march from Castro Street to City Hall. Thousands gathered holding candles.

Many expected riots and property damage from the gays, but members of all sexualities gathered peacefully, marching like a blanket of stars to hear



songs like ‘Blowin’ in the Wind’ and speeches from friends of Harvey and public figures. Even when a pick up truck rolled by, and the words “Damn fruits” were thrown into the crowd, no one bothered to shout anything back. Everyone in the crowd, surrounded by strangers, felt as comfortable as they could have in their own home. But for many people, the depression following Milk’s death soon turned into rage for this gangly middle-aged Jewish man, which further fueled the Gay Movement.

Upon hearing of their hero’s death, many gay people came out then, wanting to honor his memory. And, as if on cue, Harvey’s foresight told the world what he wanted, and what he expected from people. From his political will: “If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door” (Shilts 372). Everyone deserves to read this book. I’ve found myself reading quotes to everyone I know because they’re so incredible to me. Harvey is portrayed as this genial freedom fighter wearing an actual clown costume, shaking people’s hands, saying, “Hi, I make decisions for your city. May clowns and fruits always stand and protect our rights. Those who call themselves brave will follow suit. Works Cited Shilts, Randy. *The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*. United States of America: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1982. Print. Cloud, John. “The Pioneer HARVEY MILK.” *Time* 14 June 1999 : 1-3. Web. 15 May 2011. Ginn, Lucas. “Gay Culture flourished in pre-Nazi Germany.” Update 12 October 1995. Web. 15 May 2011. *The Times of Harvey Milk*. Dir. Rob Epstein. Black Sand Productions, 1984. Film.