

Gay Rights Activists: Harvey Milk

By Biography.com Editors and A+E Networks, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.02.16



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

Synopsis: Gay rights activist and community leader Harvey Milk made history when he was elected to San Francisco's Board of Supervisors in 1977, becoming one of the first openly gay officials in the United States. Born in New York in 1930, he was tragically shot and killed less than a year after taking office.

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 in the opera at Bay Shore High School. He also worked at the family department store, Milk's. Milk graduated from the New York State College for Teachers in 1951 and went on to join the U.S. Navy, serving as a diving instructor at a base in San Diego, California, during the Korean War. After leaving the Navy in 1955, Milk moved to New York City, where he worked as a teacher and an investment banker, among other jobs.

Milk had known that he was gay since he was a teenager. He was a private person who usually chose to remain on the sidelines, even in the wake of an emerging gay rights movement. However, things had started to change for him toward the end of his time in New York, as he befriended a number of gay activists who gathered in the city's Greenwich Village neighborhood.

New Life In San Francisco

In late 1972, Milk moved to San Francisco, California. There, he opened a camera shop called Castro Camera, located on Castro Street, the heart of the city's gay community during the 1970s. As Castro Camera increasingly became a neighborhood center, Milk found his voice as a leader and activist. In 1973, he decided to campaign for a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, which governs the city and county of San Francisco in conjunction with the mayor. Milk lost the election, but the experience did not discourage him from trying 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 had political connections that included San Francisco Mayor George Moscone.

In 1977, Milk, who was known affectionately as the "Mayor of Castro Street," finally won a seat on the Board of Supervisors. He was inaugurated 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 sought to

tackle a variety of issues in addition to gay rights, including child care, housing and the creation of a police review board headed by civilians.

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 liberal mayor, Moscone, had worked to abolish local laws that discriminated against gay people, and had appointed several gay and lesbian officials to high-profile positions within San Francisco.

Among those who opposed Moscone's efforts was Dan White, a former police officer and firefighter who served on the Board of Supervisors. White was troubled by what he saw as a breakdown in traditional values and a growing tolerance of homosexuality. Elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977, he frequently clashed with the more liberal Milk on policy issues.

White resigned from the Board of Supervisors in 1978. Prompted by his supporters in the police, he later changed his mind regarding his resignation and asked Moscone to reappoint him. The mayor refused, however, encouraged by Milk and others to fill White's spot with a more liberal board member. The decision angered White, who was convinced that Moscone and Milk had a negative influence on 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 him twice in the chest and twice in the head. White then went down the corridor and shot Milk, twice in the chest, once in the back and twice again in the head. 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 grown depressed prior to the shootings. They argued that his troubled mental state had led him to kill Milk and Moscone. To support their claim that White's mental health was poor, the lawyers noted that he had abandoned his usually healthy diet in favor of sugary junk food such as Twinkies snack cakes.

White's lawyers' argument, popularly known as the "Twinkie defense," succeeded. At the end of the trial, a jury convicted White of voluntary manslaughter, a less serious offense than murder. White went on to serve just six years in prison. Following White's conviction, peaceful demonstrations by San Francisco's gay community outside City Hall turned violent. By the end of what became known as the "White Night Riots," 124 people were injured.

In the years since his assassination, Milk's influence as a leader and pioneer has endured, with numerous books and films made about his life. In 2008, Sean Penn starred as Milk in the acclaimed film "Milk."