Triumphs and Tragedies of

Harvey Milk

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Out of our nation’s many triumphs and tragedies, this man had many of both. Harvey Milk was one of the first ever openly gay politicians, who sought equality and rights for all people no matter their gender, race, or sexual orientation. He started off as a simple corporate worker, however, got swept up in the 1960s hippie wave. He and his current boyfriend, Scott Smith moved from New York to San Francisco where they later opened their own shop, Castro Camera. He could have never guessed that the shop would soon become his campaign headquarters. From shop owner to politician, he became a man who was respected and hated by many. Milk had ideas that were somewhat unheard of at the time, but he stuck to what he thought was right and gained a following that would share the same beliefs. Even though he had an untimely death, he still has a large impact on people to this day.

Harvey aspired to become a teacher and attended the New York State College for Teachers at the age of seventeen. With a major in math and a minor in history, he graduated in June of 1951. However, soon before Milk got out of school, a war started in Korea, and America was helping the South Koreans battle against North Koreans. He enlisted in the US Navy and quickly moved up in the ranks, soon finding himself as a chief petty officer of the submarine vessel USS Kittiwake. After being stationed in a few other places, Harvey got discharged about four years after enlisting. Now, he was able to become what he planned to be, a teacher. Though his teaching career didn't last long, he met the man who he would have his longest relationship with, Joe Campbell. Their relationship ended in 1962, after about six years of dating. Milk had another job or two after this, but these were the last years of a stereotypical life.

In the late 60s and early 70s, Milk got caught up in the wave of hippies. He grew his hair out long and moved from New York to San Francisco to start a new life with his boyfriend, Scott
Smith. For almost a year they drove around California surviving off unemployment funds. After finally returning to San Francisco, the two used their last one thousand dollars to open a new business. On March 3, 1973, Castro Camera was finally ready to open. The two sold cameras and film equipment, even though neither of them knew much about their product. Harvey and Scott lived in an apartment right above the shop, and even put up a sign saying “Yes, We Are Very Open”. Milk had a growing interest in politics, so in the 1973 election he decided to run for a spot on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, however, didn't win. He tried again the following year and lost. Determined to be in politics, now any small amount of money that came in from Castro Camera was being used for the next campaign signs. When the 1975 election was over, Scott moved out, and Harvey lost his partner and the political race again that year. During the 1976 campaigning year, Milk managed to meet a new boyfriend, Jake Lira. Finally, the years of campaigning and hard work paid off and after the 1976 general election ended, Harvey Milk secured a spot on the Board.

Harvey Milk completed many tasks during his first month in office. Soon after Harvey was elected, a bill was being fought to be passed that would ban gay people from teaching across America. He spread the word and was able to convince many politicians to vote against it, including Ronald Reagan and President Jimmy Carter. He fought for people of all communities, not just the LGBTQ+ people. Milk strongly believed helping senior citizens was imperative. Milk had a knack for getting people together and speaking about topics and ideas that most people could easily see as common sense. He came up with bills that many people agreed with, such as fines for not picking up your dog's poop on the sidewalk. While working to make this a
law, at rallies he would “accidentally” step in dog poop to lighten the mood and prove his point. In addition, Milk put in place the San Francisco’s gay rights ordinance, which would only be voted against by one person, a fellow board member Dan White. The law would make it so people could not be kicked out of their homes or fired from their job just because they were LGBTQ+. In 1978, several months after it was passed, Dan entered the City Hall with a .38-caliber revolver and extra bullets in his pocket. He went into the mayor’s office and shot him four times, then he headed to Harvey Milk’s office and killed him also. Harvey hadn't even served a year in office by the time he was assassinated.

Soon after killing both the mayor Moscone and Milk, Dan turned himself into the police. In a recorded confession he admitted with tears in his eyes, “I just shot him”. In the trial, his defense team used excuses which are now known as the Twinkie Defense. They argued that White was in a state of depression, so he was unable to judge right from wrong. To prove that he was depressed, they said that Dan went from being a health-conscious person to eating sugary junk food, such as Twinkies. Even though he committed a double murder, he was only convicted for voluntary manslaughter and was sentenced seven years in prison. At the time, first-degree murder could be punishable by the death penalty, so many people thought this was an unjust punishment.

Mourners gathered in Castro, most of which holding candles. The quiet march to City Hall was lead by a drummer and people carrying flags. Later that week, a memorial service was held for both men; the mayor’s at the City Hall and Harvey’s at the opera house. Milk’s eyes were donated, as his wish was that he could grant someone sight if they were to undergo surgery. Riots broke out and eventually led to the doors of City Hall where the doors and windows were
shattered and twelve police cars burned. These are known as the White Night riots. The event cost hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of property damage to the city hall. Harvey Milk’s mark on that city only got larger after his untimely death.

While Harvey Milk’s life was cut quite short, his name is still remembered to this day. In 2009, California’s governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, signed a law that would officially make May 22 (Milk’s birthday) Harvey Milk Day. The same year Milk was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, which is a medal that is given by the President. This metal is the highest civilian award in the United States and is only given to people that have done something that contributes to world peace or making America a better place for everyone. San Francisco’s gay rights ordinance convinced other states to make laws that are the same or similar. Milk placed hope in many people's hearts and built a strong community of proud people. Many groups and some places are a commemoration of him, such as the Harvey Milk LGBTQ Democratic Club, which was originally known as the Gay Democratic Club. They were first founded in 1976 and changed their name in 1978 after Harvey’s assassination. The club is open to anyone who is into progressive politics. Their members try to influence politicians to make pro-LGBTQ+ laws and protect citizens. The movie, Milk was a biographical film released October 28, 2008. To this day the ideas of Harvey live on.

Harvey Milk showed through the years that he was a man of honesty, pride, and politics. While he was alive he made many accomplishments such as serving in the Navy, being a teacher, and becoming a business owner. As he realized public service was his calling he decided to get
into politics. Milk was open with who he was and strived so that other people could be also. He started off as an unknown graduate and moved on to become a historical figure of today. Though fear of death was factored into his everyday life, he didn't stop pushing for what was right. However, Harvey was assassinated at the young age of forty-eight years old. Though his ideas were found questionable by many, they have influenced many people of today to stand for what they believe is right. Many famous people of today are able to be out of the closet because of some of the impacts on America that Harvey Milk made, such as Ellen DeGeneres, Tammy Baldwin, and Kyrsten Sinema. His ideas and beliefs helped make it so queer people can be politicians, teachers, celebrities, actors, etc. There is still room for improvement with laws and regulations when it comes to LGBTQ+ rights, but this man definitely gave us a head start. Without the influence of Harvey Milk, we may not be where we are today when it comes to rights in schools, workplaces, and politics.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


-This newspaper provides information on what happened on the day that Harvey Milk and George Moscone were assassinated. It also gives details about the events that took place afterward.


-This image is a Harvey Milk memorial that shares more information on his life.


-An image of Harvey Milk used in the paper to show how he looks.
Secondary Sources


-This book was the most used source of information.


-The chapter Harvey Milk in this book was used to find additional information about his life.