

Working Together in common cause: The legacy of Harvey Milk

by Jay Brown

The lesbian and gay community is a natural coalition composed of people of all ethnic, socio-economic and age groups. That this multifaceted community can successfully repel a major assault on its civil liberties by working with other minorities is the essential message of *The Times of Harvey Milk*.

The Times of Harvey Milk should be of particular interest to Multnomah County residents, as they will most probably face a right wing offensive in the very near future — possibly at the next available election. A group of people calling themselves Concerned Citizens of Portland headed by former State Representative Drew Davis, is lending an assault by initiative petition to repeal the protections given gays and lesbians by the recently passed amendments to the Multnomah County Charter's human rights ordinance. *Concerned Citizens of Portland* are credited with handing former Mayor Frank Ivancie 42,250 write-in votes in last November's election.

The film opens to the devastating television news announcement by Diane Feinstein (then President of the Board of Supervisors) that both Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk had been shot and killed in their offices at City Hall. The assassin was Dan White, fellow Supervisor and former policeman and fireman. Harvey Milk's journey to that day is then recounted, beginning with the voice of Milk, reading a will he drew up and taped "to be played only in the event of my death by assassination."

Milk ran for political office three times from 1973 to 1978 and lost each time. Yet he became increasingly popular for his neighborhood involvement, his grass roots "machine" and his outrageous sense of humor. One of his strongest assets was his



ability to bring together minorities, neighborhood groups, the aged, rank and file union members and gays and lesbians in common cause.

Parallel to Milk's spectacular ascension in San Francisco politics is the emergence of the Castro District as a vibrant and nationally recognized "gay neighborhood" which drew lesbians and gay men from across the country. The election of progressive Mayor George Moscone and the implementation of his brand of coalition politics allowed the election of public officials by district instead of by city-wide voting. The predominantly gay Castro District suddenly achieved new political importance and Harvey Milk decided to run for a seat on the Board of Supervisors, his fourth bid for public office.

At the age of 47, Harvey Milk finally won, becoming California's first openly gay elected official along with the first Chinese American, the first black woman and the first women's rights advocate to serve on the Board of Supervisors. Lost in the excitement, was the election of Dan White, another kind of populist. White, elected from a blue collar neighborhood, stood for the "old fashioned values that built this country." Dan White and Harvey Milk became opposing symbols of the city's new elections.

Milk lost no time explaining his philosophy to the press. "In San Francisco, as anywhere else," he said, you have the browns fighting

with the blacks, the Filipinos not talking to the Asians and they all hate the gays. Over the years, we've all had to fight for the crumbs. But because of district elections, we're overcoming these problems and there's a tremendous harmony developing. It's essential that ethnic minorities, gays and rank and file union members link together." He began talking about the rights of senior citizens, the drawbacks of high rise development, voting machines for non-English speaking residents and even a scooter ordinance.

The Times of Harvey Milk is a stunningly emotional experience and not to be missed.

The issue closest to Milk's heart, however, was a gay rights bill which, in 1978, passed the Board of Supervisors and was enthusiastically signed into law by Mayor Moscone. Dan White cast the only dissenting vote. White also predicted a strong backlash to what he

termed "the moral decay of the city" and moved to stop the annual Gay Day Celebration.

Calling San Francisco "the moral garbage dump of the nation," State Senator John Briggs introduces a statewide referendum known as Proposition 6 which would deny homosexuals their jobs teaching in public schools.

Harvey Milk organizes a grass roots campaign against the Briggs initiative and is thrust into the national spotlight as a gay leader. Governor Ronald Reagan and President Jimmy Carter come out against Proposition 6 and in November of 1978, Briggs is defeated by a surprising 2-1 margin across the state.

A few days later, citing financial problems, Supervisor Dan White unexpectedly resigns his seat on the Board of Supervisors. The next day, he changes his mind but legally, it is too late for him to re-claim his office and it is up to Mayor Moscone to decide whether or not to re-appoint him. Harvey Milk lobbies hard against White's re-appointment and Moscone decides to appoint someone else to represent White's district. Before Moscone can make the announcement to the press, Dan White, carrying a loaded revolver and ten extra rounds of ammunition enters City Hall through an open window to avoid the metal detector and assassinates both George Moscone and Harvey Milk.

On the evening of the assassinations, 45,000 people fill the streets in a silent candlelight tribute to the two slain leaders, a demonstration Sally Gearhart calls "one of the most eloquent expressions of a community's response to violence I have ever seen." Dan White goes on trial for murder and the prosecution argues a simple motive — revenge. The defense portrays White as an all-American Catholic family man, an idealist

disgusted with the corruption of politics. The jury selection process excludes gays, minority residents and anyone whose politics are in opposition to those of Dan White. After eleven days, White is found guilty of voluntary manslaughter by reason of diminished cap-



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