

national news

She's the right person at the right time

San Francisco Mayor Frank Jordan appeared both the Latino and gay and lesbian communities when he appointed Susan Leal, a Latina lesbian, to fill Roberta Achtenberg's vacant seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. Achtenberg resigned June 2 to join the Clinton administration as assistant secretary at HUD. Leal (pronounced lay-ALL) was sworn in on June 7 and will complete the two years remaining on Achtenberg's term.

Jordan had been under pressure from Latino/as, whose sole representative lost his bid for reelection last year. The gay and lesbian community lobbied Jordan equally hard, since they believed Achtenberg's seat should be filled by a gay man or lesbian. Leal was a choice that many from both sides could live with.

"I am delighted to name Susan Leal," Jordan said in a press release. "She is the right person, at the right time, to the right kind of job for San Francisco. She'll be a real asset to the Board and more importantly to the city of San Francisco."

Leal, 43, is the youngest daughter of Mexican immigrants. She was born and raised in San Francisco. She holds a law degree from the University of California at Berkeley. She is also vice president of Healthcare COMPARE Corporation, a health-care cost-management firm she helped found. She is currently single.

"I'm going to first of all answer to all the people of San Francisco, but I will have a particular sensitivity to the Latina/o community and to the gay and lesbian community," she said at the press conference announcing her appointment. "I am proud of being Latina. I am proud of being a lesbian."

Leal worked on Capitol Hill from 1976 through early 1981 as counsel to the House Energy and Commerce Committee's Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations.

A political newcomer, she says she never planned on a political career until a few weeks ago when friends offered her name to the mayor for consideration as a replacement for Achtenberg.

"I was approached for the position because some people felt I didn't represent different factions in the community," she said in an interview. "They felt I was more apt to attract a broader cross-section of the community."

Leal is the first openly gay or lesbian person of color to sit on the Board of Supervisors. As for her support in the general Latino/a community, Leal

says the notion that Latino/as are less tolerant of sexual minorities is false and misleading.

"I think it's a stereotype," she said. "I met with a cross-section of Latino/a groups and many of them supported me. I've come across more skepticism and homophobia among the white, Anglo community. In the Latino/a community I didn't have people backing up when I said I was lesbian." Leal finds herself in a unique and challenging position. The largely Spanish-speaking Mission district has a different set of problems and concerns than the relatively affluent Castro and Noe Valley neighborhoods where Leal lives.

"There are a lot of common threads in the Latina/o and gay communities," she said. "Public safety is important to both. Both are concerned about the city working well, and with keeping jobs in the city."

Lesbian and gay communities appear pleased with Leal for the moment. She describes herself as "a moderate Democrat." What that means and how it will play out in a community that considers itself anywhere from liberal to progressive remains to be seen.

"There may be certain groups that may be unhappy with me but I think most will be happy that I am fairly moderate and a part of the business community," she said.

As for the possibility of protests over her positions, "I am prepared to face that from all communities," she said.

Leal cannot afford to anger many people; she intends to run for election to her own four-year term on the Board. She has little time to establish her own identity with the election just two years away. In addition, Leal is almost certain to be directly challenged by longtime Latino/a political activists, some of whom resent being passed over for a relative newcomer. "I know that three or four Latina/os will run for office," she said. "What I have to do is try to do some consensus-building. I have to set myself apart as a serious candidate not just for certain factions but reach out to the many parts of the community."

Meanwhile, outgoing supervisor Roberta Achtenberg said her formal "good-bye" to San Francisco.

"We have a very special way of doing business in San Francisco that has already served me well," she said to hundreds of well-wishers gathered in the City Hall chambers. "We San Franciscans have participated in an unusual morality play that played itself out on a national stage. It inspired us and we came out looking pretty damn good."

Later that evening Castro Street was closed to traffic and over 2,000 people gave her a rousing

send-off at a huge street party. The following day Achtenberg, her lover, Judge Mary Morgan, and their son, Benjamin, boarded a plane for Washington, D.C.

Sidney Brinkley

AIDS cases up in 1993

The number of people with AIDS in the United States surged by more than 35,000 during the first three months of this year, most due to a new definition of the disease, government health officials reported.

Cases not attributed to the broader definition rose sharply, climbing 21 percent, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported. "That is higher than we expected," said Dr. John Ward, chief

of AIDS surveillance for the CDC. "Some of that 21 percent is a sign that the AIDS epidemic is continuing to grow." It also means that people with HIV who have fought off illness for several years with medication are starting to get sick.

Since 1987, patients with HIV were considered to have AIDS once they contracted blood infections, Kaposi's sarcoma or any of 21 other diseases. Starting this year, pulmonary tuberculosis, recurring pneumonia, invasive cervical cancer and a significant decline in immune cells were added as diseases indicating AIDS.

From Jan. 1 through March 31, 35,779 new AIDS cases were diagnosed nationwide, a 204 percent increase from the 11,770 new cases during the same period last year, the CDC reported.

Rep. Gerry Studds and biodiversity

Congressman Gerry Studds declared the Endangered Species Act vital to preserving both threatened animal species and a host of natural medicinal agents that could yield treatments for AIDS and other diseases. Studds introduced legislation last month reauthorizing the ESA, which is designed to protect threatened and endangered species of plants and animals.

Studds stressed the relevance of species diversity to the search for a cure for AIDS. He cited the recent case of *calanolide A*, a potent anti-HIV compound derived from a tree found in a Malaysian swamp. Laboratory tests of samples collected from the tree were found 100 percent effective in preventing the replication of the HIV-1 virus.

On the basis of preliminary research, the National Cancer Institute sent a team of collectors back to Malaysia to gather more material from the tree. They found the tree had been cut down, and have not been able to find another one. According to Rep. Studds, other species found in the rain forest show similar potential. "We must act now to be sure these species are still there when we learn how to harness their secrets," he said.

HIV tests for boxers

Pressure for mandatory HIV antibody testing of professional boxers increased dramatically in late April when British boxing authorities stripped world featherweight champ Ruben Palacio of his title after learning he had tested positive for HIV. The British Boxing Board of Control announced Palacio's antibody status April 16, the day before he was slated to defend his World Boxing Organization title. The fight was canceled, and Palacio was sent home to Colombia.

A week later, the World Boxing Association said it was considering requiring HIV tests of boxers before all fights. "I don't think we can delay getting boxers tested any longer," said WBA chief legal counsel Jimmy Binns. "In boxing there is a probability, if not a certainty, that infected boxers will infect other boxers, referees, trainers, or people at ringside. In some of these fights, there is blood flying everywhere, and we have a responsibility to make sure that no one is infected."

Civil libertarians said mandatory HIV testing may violate federal anti-discrimination laws, as well as state laws in California, New York and New Jersey, three of the states where many fights are held. "Testing boxers for HIV is simply encouraging people to be hysterical," said Alma Gomez, staff counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union's AIDS project.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention spokesman Kent Taylor agreed. "There continues to be no known case of HIV transmission through any sport anywhere," he said.

Compiled by Beth Hyams

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