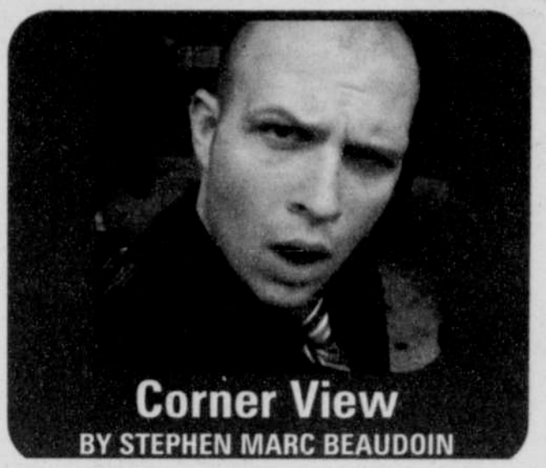
# Say My Name, Say My Name

## Harvey Milk, Hillary Clinton and Sam Adams say it loud




The room was dark, and shards of light cut across the crowd. The screen onstage filled with flicking candles, thousands of them, raised in an almost unison salute, accompanied by heartbeat symphonic strings. People wept on film; people wept in the audience. I wept, too, and then started to sob; a stranger offered a Kleenex.

The setting was Clinton Street Theater, and the gathering was a viewing of the seminal 1984 gay documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk*, closing out the second annual QDoc: Portland Queer Documentary Film Festival. I'm embarrassed to admit I hadn't seen the film before, and when the lights went down I had no idea what I was in store for: a highly charged chronicling of recent gay history's most loved martyr, the "Mayor of Castro Street," that left me—and that full room of queers and allies—breathless, speechless and emotionally wrung dry.

It was likely the first time I experienced such a heightened communal emotional connection with other sexual minorities—perhaps in my life. I'll never forget that as the film barreled to its astonishing end, the applause began, and built to a seismic wall-rattling ovation, with the audience on its feet in wild display, and if you weren't screaming you were crying and I was crying again, only by then it was not just for Harvey Milk the man, but for the moment, too. Is this rare? Is it authentic? Looking back now, it certainly seemed to be both.

I had a similar experience about a week later, during U.S. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton's presidential bid-ending speech June 8, broadcast live from Washington, D.C.'s Building History Museum. She sounded a hopeful note in her endorsement of U.S. Sen. Barack Obama, and she called out, demographic by demographic, the wonderfully varied faces of Americans who voted for her in the primary.

*"[Hillary Clinton] called out, demographic by demographic, the wonderfully varied faces of Americans who voted for her in the primary...'women and men, young and old, Latino and Asian...African American and Caucasian, rich, poor and middle class, gay and straight.'"*

I was walking down Division with a gay friend from Seattle, reading Clinton's remarks aloud from NYTimes.com on my cell phone: "women and men, young and old, Latino and Asian," I read with increasing volume: "African American and Caucasian, rich, poor and middle class, gay and straight." My voice caught as I read that last part of the sentence. I read it over again, silently mouthing the words: "rich, poor and middle class, *gay and straight*." I stopped walking and just said, "Wow." And when I later watched the YouTube video of Clinton's performance, I was met with another wow: the roar of her D.C. crowd as she uttered the words "gay and straight," so similar to that roar from Clinton Street Theater—the roar of recognition.

So amazing, that simple power of being noted, of naming and being named. It seems to be one of the tenets of "gay pride": the act of naming oneself and others, of claiming a part of one's identity so often difficult (if not impossible) to be claimed.

I've long wondered if maybe the most important part of "gay pride" is, quite simply, its name (though most Pride fests refrain from using "gay" these days and opt instead for the all-encompassing "queer"; some, like "Pride Northwest," entirely skip naming what sort of pride it is they're celebrating).

There was another man of history in that crowd at the *Harvey Milk* screening—openly gay Portland Mayor-elect Sam Adams. In most of his speeches and statements on the groundbreaking nature of his election, he dismisses his sexual orientation as subsidiary to his other talents; he likes to say, "There is no gay or straight way of filling a pothole."

But even in that pithy statement, he does something powerful and prideful: He calls out his community. He recognizes his own status as an openly gay man and, in doing so, he recognizes us all. jo

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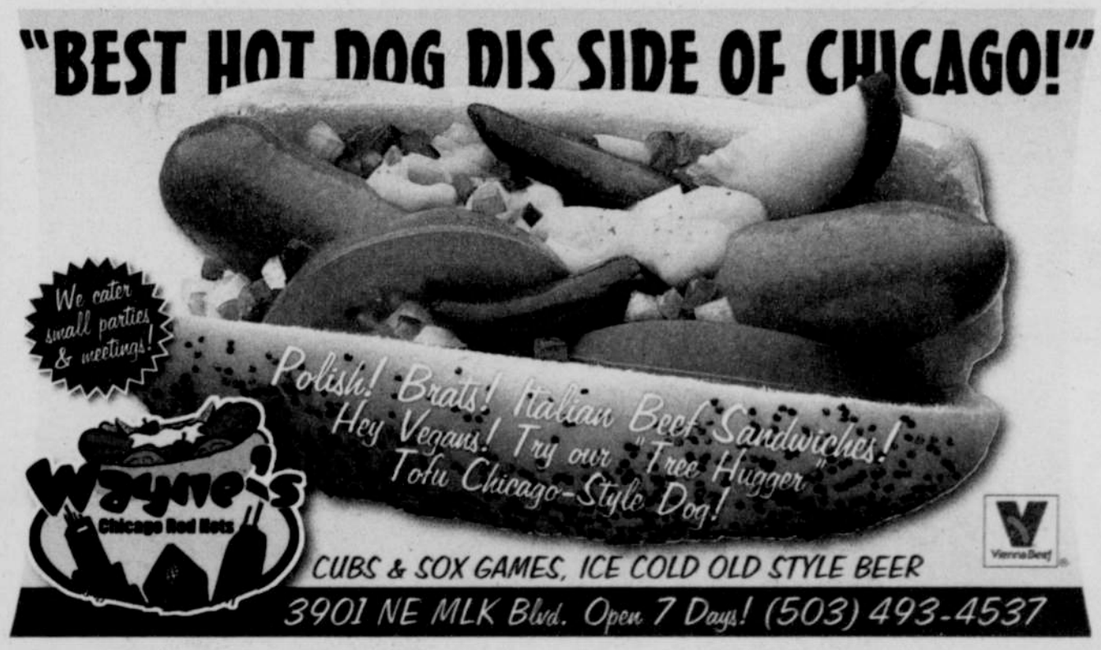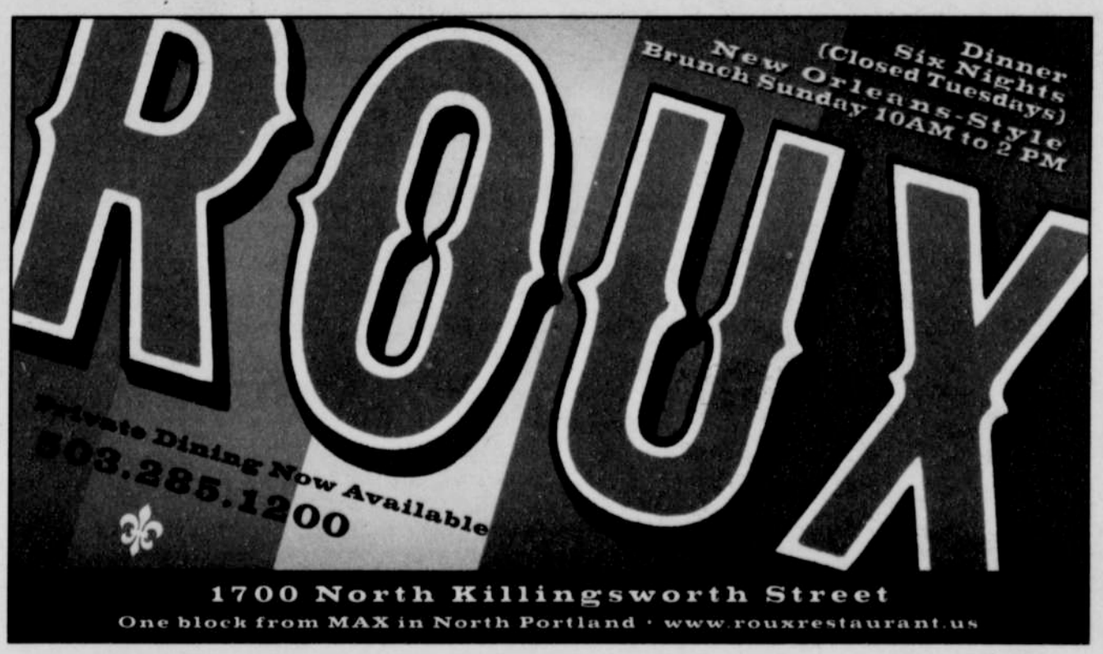
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