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Essay Contest

1 message

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Fri, Jan 18, 2019 at 8:11 AM

Here's a copy of my essay for the contest.

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1/13/19

Harvey Milk: The Gay Legacy

Despite state of affairs during the 1960s and 70s, native Harvey Milk was openly homosexual and served on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. While on the board, he expressed his liberal views forthrightly. He made a huge impact on the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer (LGBTQ) movement and became a leader in the fight for gay rights. His campaigns, despite their lack of organization, were effective. Unfortunately, an extreme act of violence ended his life. On November 27, 1978, Milk was shot five times in his office by another supervisor, Dan White, in an attempt to silence his voice (Patterson). However, killing Harvey Milk did not silence his ideals, and his legacy lives on.

Harvey Milk did most of his organizing from the small camera shop he owned on Castro Street. "When customers came into the store, he was less interested in selling them merchandise than in finding out whether they were registered voters... In 1974 alone he personally talked 2,350 gay people into becoming voters" (Faderman 88). In other words, he engaged them in a political process that they felt disenfranchised from. He had a strong commitment to represent gay people in government; he wanted their voices heard. As a result of his persistence and hard work he earned a seat on The San Francisco Board and crossed the boundaries of the political possibilities for the time period. "Castro Camera soon became less a business enterprise for Harvey than a community center..." (Faderman 89). He very much valued his own personal connection with the people, and the work he did on Castro Street became his life. He was willing to commit himself so fully to the cause because Milk cared. He cared about how San Francisco was run and he cared about how gay people were treated and represented in politics.

Harvey Milk must have known the risks for his honesty, for he said, "If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door" (Patterson). He bravely put himself out on the political front lines of the gay rights movement, endangering his own life to improve those of others. This demonstrates his willingness to sacrifice his own life for the greater good. In a Guardian article, Cleve Jones, one of Harvey Milk's interns, shares his personal reaction to Milk's death. "And now he is dead and it is all over and we are listening to his voice tell us that he always knew that this is how he would go down" (Jones). Many gay people were swayed by his assassination. Milk knew that he was in danger, and he knew that assassination was entirely possible. Harvey Milk's ultimate goal was for everyone to be proud of who they were and not feel forced to hide themselves in order to conform to societal expectations. This courage that he displayed needs to be more recognized. His impact on the gay rights movement was so defining. The decisions he made while he was a supervisor on the San Francisco board would benefit the gay community for years to come. According to NPR, "Today, the seat Milk held when he was killed is occupied by another openly gay man, Rafael Mandelman" (Shafer). Milk influenced the next generation of gay people to follow in his footsteps of political activism.

Harvey Milk enacted a lot of legislation to promote gay rights. His boycott on Coors beer was dangerous because boycotting such a big corporation might have put him at risk of losing necessary campaign donations. This is another example of political courage, because Coors beer was a popular brand and that repudiating them would alienate their customers. He did it anyways because he knew that a large gay community was counting on him to represent them in the government. Milk was one of the only gay elected officials in the United States at the time, and so people were counting on him to make a change. Another one of his biggest accomplishments was disavowing the Briggs Initiative. The Initiative was a plan to fire all homosexual teachers in the state of California (Patterson). Harvey Milk fought indefatigably to prevent the growing of anti-gay policies in California. He succeeded, and it was a great triumph for the statewide gay community. To prevent such discriminatory legislation from being passed again, Milk passed a gay rights ordinance in 1978, saying that gay people could not be fired from their jobs on the basis of being their sexual orientation.

Harvey Milk was a social architect. He poured his heart and soul into the advancement of the gay rights movement, as well as the rights themselves. Milk defied political norms and was openly and proudly gay. This was the motivation behind his life's endeavor. He spent hours organizing in the back of his camera shop and was not afraid to fight fiercely for his beliefs. That is what political courage is. It's about fighting for what is right, no matter the risk. His work is still in play in modern day society. Nancy Pelosi spoke about this on Harvey Milk day. "Harvey Milk changed the course of history; now,

we will create a future in which the LGBT Community and all Americans achieve true equality” (Pelosi). Whether it is inspiring us all to make change or it was the stepping stone for other gay elected officials, he made a gigantic impact.

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