



From the Ashes of Harvey Milk: Community United Against Violence (CUAV) Celebrates 30 Years!

Nearly 30 years ago, in May of 1979, the seeds were sown for the first organized effort to address anti-gay violence in the country. Nationally, the movement for gay and lesbian rights was growing and gaining visibility in American society and was met with a violent backlash. In San Francisco this dynamic exploded into a night of community riots, state-sanctioned violence and blatant police brutality against gay and lesbian communities. In response, grassroots organizers moved to create safety within our own community, an effort that would grow into Community United Against Violence, or CUAV.

Just the year before, the state of Florida had run a successful homophobic "Save the Children" campaign with Anita Bryant as the famous spokesperson. A new law denied LGBT people the right to teach and was translated into denying LGBT people many other kinds of rights such as freedom from discrimination at work and the right to adopt.

Then California legislator John Briggs took inspiration from Florida's homophobic onslaught and proposed the "Briggs Initiative", which would prevent LGBT people from teaching in California. A new member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, and San Francisco's only out gay politician, Harvey Milk, helped lead a campaign to defeat the Initiative. Simultaneously, Milk proposed employment anti-discrimination policies in San Francisco. The Briggs Initiative was defeated and the anti-discrimination policies passed!

Historically, we know that liberation often brings about violent reproach. For example, the Ku Klux Klan was not formed until *after* the Emancipation Proclamation, and with each step towards Civil Rights from the 1930's to the 1960's, the ensuing racist violence can be traced. So, too, with homophobia and anti-queer violence. Following the successful defeat of the Briggs Initiative and the new citywide anti-discrimination policies, police abuse of queer folks and straight allies and the general population in the Castro, Tenderloin, and Polk Street escalated to record highs. Our leaders, heroes, and activists were being beaten and harassed by the state.

Just weeks after these historic victories for civil rights, On November 27, 1978, Dan White, a former member of the Board of Supervisors, crawled through a basement window at City Hall and assassinated Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk. White had been a political ally of Milk until the two had a falling out over a land-use issue. That November White had resigned from the Board, then changed his mind, and was seeking re-appointment. Milk raised legal questions about the request, and the Mayor denied White's petition. The assassination set off a string of events that changed San Francisco and the path of the LGBT civil rights movement.

During the murder trial, White, a former firefighter and police officer, claimed the crimes were not pre-meditated and that he had not been of sound mind due to depression. As an example, his attorneys explained that White, a health-food advocate, had been eating junk-food before he killed Milk and Moscone. The press caught on to this argument, labeling it the "Twinkie Defense". On May 21, 1979, less than a year after the

assassinations, Dan White was convicted of manslaughter, not murder, and was given a light sentence.

The LGBT community and their allies were incensed. In utter shock, the community staged a peaceful protest; however, within a few hours, the protest had turned into a full scale riot where police cars were set on fire and the glass doors and windows of City Hall were shattered. As the riot escalated, several uniformed members of the police force, in retaliation, took it upon themselves to head to the Castro, march into the Elephant Walk, one of the numerous gay bars, and begin beating the patrons. This became known as the White Night Riots – a prime example of police abuse and state sanctioned violence.

On May 22, 1979, a birthday celebration in honor of the late Harvey Milk had been planned, but there were worries of continuing rioting and violence. The LGBT community knew that they could not count on any sort of police protection or support, and in fact, were terrified of more police retaliation. Faced with a difficult decision about whether or not to go ahead with the plans for a celebration in memory of Milk, the LGBT community banded together to train safety monitors for the event, calling themselves the “Butterfly Brigade”. In the face of a community in mourning, a ridiculous court ruling, and rioting, the birthday celebration for Milk was a success *because* the LGBT community trained each other and took matters of safety into their own hands. The Butterfly Brigade and a school-based speakers bureau program formed and then came together to give birth to CUAV - the first LGBT focused anti-violence organization in the United States.

Since May 22, 1979, Community United Against Violence has evolved with the changing needs of the LGBT community. CUAV works to prevent and respond to all forms of violence perpetrated against LGBTQ communities, as well as violence within the community, such as domestic violence and racism. As Harvey Milk often said "You've Gotta Give Them Hope." CUAV has worked tirelessly to give all of us the hope that it is possible to create a culture where all LGBTQ people are safe from violence.

Dr. Ardel Thomas is the Chair of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Program at City College of San Francisco, and a member of the Board of Directors of CUAV.