

CHRISTINE KEHOE



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Guided by Conscience

It's not always easy separating politicians from the cities they serve. Destinies have a way of twining together. Think Chicago and Daley, or Philadelphia and Rizzo or even Portland and Vera Katz. The city and its politician, their triumphs and tragedies, become almost one.

San Diego and Christine Kehoe share such a path. The city and the state senator from its historic center grew up together, you might say, each one shedding an early identity that didn't quite fit.

There was the conservative military town full of retirees who had come to enjoy the golf and sun, a place not terribly kind to unions and gays. For better and worse, that San Diego seemed eternally stuck in the 1950s.

And there was the young woman from the small blue-collar town of Troy, New York, who was raised in an

Irish Catholic family. Confronting a failed marriage and a secret at her core, she hopped into a car in the summer of 1978 and headed west. As she crossed the border of San Diego, she took one look at the city and the Pacific beyond and fell captive.

Over the next three decades, San Diego would not only redirect her life and give it a whole new shape but she would alter the contours of San Diego, first in her role as a city councilwoman and then as a member of the state Assembly and finally as a state senator dedicated to sustainable growth, environmental protection, education reform and civil rights for the LGBT community.

"Coming West to reinvent yourself is one of those enduring myths and clichés—I know," Senator Kehoe said. "But when I look back, that's pretty much what happened in my life. California does change

people. It changed me."

Christine Kehoe has hardly discarded the lessons that framed her early life, just as San Diego today—less provincial, more progressive—still clings to some of its old conventions. Both the state senator and the city have found an effective way to meld what was then and what is now.

While it's true that Senator Kehoe is the first openly gay elected official in San Diego history, no one would ever describe her as a LGBT firebrand. The style she prefers is a far cry from in-your-face. Congenial, sleeves rolled up, her approach is a nod to both her small town, Catholic upbringing and her later baptism as a San Diego AIDS activist.

"A lot of my straight constituents tell me, 'I thought you'd be a single issue candidate, and you're not.' They're pleasantly surprised by that. I've never felt a great deal of tension

between me being a lesbian and a politician. Yes, we do bills that benefit the LGBT community but not as many as you would think, especially now that we've made so many advances in civil rights.

"Being high profile isn't one of my goals. I'd much rather start the program, find the funding, build the road. I consider it my job to listen to my constituents."

It's not so simple separating the politicization of Christine Kehoe from the embrace of her sexual identity. To understand the process, delayed as it was, it helps to understand the world of her childhood. Nothing more apt could be said about Troy than it was a safe place to grow up. A town of 25,000 residents set along the eastern bank of the Hudson River, it sits in the shadow of the Albany state capitol and was known as "Collar City"—for all the shirts and textiles manufactured there.

It wasn't enough that you were Catholic. The Italians lived in one neighborhood, and the Poles lived in another and the Irish separate from that. "Our neighborhood was all Irish Catholic except the house two doors away, where the father was Protestant and the kids went to public schools. That was our idea of diversity. All of us attended St. Joseph's, the parish school a block and a half away."

Kehoe was born in 1950, a middle child with two older siblings and two younger ones. Her father worked 42 years for General Electric in nearby Schenectady, her mother at the state capitol. They were Democrats but not in any liberal sense. "Our dinner table conversations were that government should help the poor, the little guy. My parents weren't union members, but my mother would recall how unfair work could be for women and

Irish Catholics."

Kehoe says she bordered on the goody two-shoes, and she remembers her world turning inside out when The Beatles came to America. Each of her siblings chipped in a dollar and bought the "Meet the Beatles" album from Woolworths. She started wearing bell-bottom jeans and pointy black boots and gave her brother a mop top cut. "They were so fresh and new, and their music just exploded into our



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lives. Between our Catholic education and the conservative social values of our parents, The Beatles busted through. It felt like liberation, really."

She joined the debate team in high school but hated it. Never once did she think of running for class president or treasurer. Then she got married at the age of twenty two and graduated college with a BA degree in English. What lay ahead seemed fated: children and an everyday job.

But something not yet definable

kept nagging at her. The marriage soured. She wondered what was out there—beyond Troy. A high school friend happened to be moving to San Diego. She hitched a ride.

At the time, she barely thought of herself a feminist, much less a lesbian. Her first job in San Diego, at the Center for Women's Studies and Services, put her in touch with feminist social issues and victims of rape and domestic violence. Several of her co-workers were lesbians.

"When I got married, I never gave any thought to being lesbian. I attribute that to my Irish-Catholic upbringing. It was at the women's center where I began to understand my deeper sexuality. The women there were really good to me, and they probably understood more about the process I was undergoing than I did."

In the summer of 1980, during a visit back home, she came out to her brothers and sisters. Even though they were all "very accepting," she never addressed the matter with her parents. They died without the conversation ever taking place. "I guess you could say it was sort of a "Don't ask, don't tell" type of situation. My parents wouldn't have discussed heterosexuality. So to discuss homosexuality, it wasn't in their makeup."

Kehoe's transition from women's issues with a strong feminist bent to the cause of gay and lesbian equal rights did not occur in a vacuum. By the early 1980s, gay men were dying of AIDS in a San Diego that seemed not to know or care about the epidemic. If the problem was sealed in silence, Kehoe now had a forum to urge it out in the open. She had been named the editor of the San Diego Gayzette, a community weekly covering arts and local politics and

gay night life. There she met Julie Warren, the graphic designer for the paper. Twenty seven years later, they share a life together that they never foresaw at that time.

Kehoe launched AIDS onto the front page of the Gayzette even as the Union Tribune kept mum about the stricken sailors and Marines who, out of fear, were failing to report their illnesses to the military. She sent reporters to Balboa Hospital, where some U.S. Navy doctors were outing AIDS patients to the command, violating doctor-patient confidentiality.

“Men in their twenties were dying at home on the couch without anyone knowing about it, often without them getting any real treatment. That little weekly changed the mainstream. The issue became front and center.”

With the paper losing money and about to fold, Kehoe joined the campaign to oppose Proposition 64, the 1986 California ballot initiative sponsored by extremist Lyndon LaRouche. The measure, which sought to quarantine people infected with AIDS, stood no chance of passing in San Francisco or Los Angeles. But the LGBT community wasn't so sure about San Diego.

Day and night for two months, Kehoe and her volunteers worked the phones and walked the streets. Proposition 64 belonged to the Dark Ages. When the votes were counted, San Diego rejected the measure at the same rate as San Francisco and Los Angeles. It marked a coming of age—both for the city and Kehoe.

After a stint as a volunteer coordinator for the AIDS Assistance Fund, Kehoe devoted herself fulltime to the Hillcrest Business Association. The historic district with its tree-lined residential neighborhoods and fine

medical institutions had begun to take on the patina of hip. Coffee houses and gift shops, many of them infused by the energy of a growing LGBT community, had added a whole new flavor to the business strip.

Hillcrest and the rest of the Third District was represented by City Councilman John Hartley, a realtor who took note of Kehoe's hard work as the executive director of the business association and brought her on staff.

With Bishop V. Gene Robinson, New Hampshire Diocese, Episcopalian Church



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For more than two years, Kehoe was not only Hartley's liaison to the LGBT community but the staffer who worked with citizen patrols and helped turn small business districts into full-fledged business associations. “We'd start with a 7 a.m. meeting and end with a 7 p.m. meeting, and on weekends we organized street fairs. I loved it,” she said.

When Hartley decided not to seek a second term, Kehoe understood almost immediately that this would

be her chance for political office. She knew the community, knew the issues. Strangely, only seven percent of registered voters polled in the Third District knew who Kehoe was.

The gay community, sensing the moment had finally arrived for San Diego to elect its first openly gay public official, couldn't wait to dig in. But its leaders, who had spent years fighting for the formation of a political district where gays and lesbians held sway, wanted one more “look-see” before they committed any money.

Kehoe could read their ambivalence. She preferred tee shirts and jeans and a hair style that, in her words, had come and gone. “I know they were all thinking, ‘Look at her hair!’ They were so disappointed that I wasn't more glamorous.” But she won them over with her sincerity and straight forward approach.

The campaign was short, but the Union Tribune made sure to publish the long list of Kehoe's gay resume: co-chair of Lesbian/Gay Pride, editor of the Gayzette, co-chair of the Human Dignity Ordinance and so on.

If the powers-that-be were trying to marginalize Kehoe, painting her in the color of a single issue activist, she kept talking about the issues that echoed with most every San Diegan, gay or straight: crime, schools, vital neighborhoods, more streamlined government. Kehoe and her band of supporters managed to twice walk the neighborhoods of Hillcrest, Balboa Park and North Park handing out literature to most, if not all, of the 140,000 residents.

“That first campaign still stands out as my favorite campaign. It was simple and quick, and we managed to combine a lot of hard work with a lot of luck, and we won.”

For all her frontline agitating,

Kehoe carved out a record on the San Diego City Council as a moderate, stressing clean and safe neighborhoods and strong schools, police and fire services. If a handful of LGBT activists took umbrage at seeing their issues sometimes relegated to the middle of the pile, most others came to appreciate the tightrope Kehoe was walking.

The Third District, for all its brashness, was not San Francisco's Castro. What it did carry was the highest crime rate in the city. Kehoe set about bringing together government and business in a partnership that built a police station, library, tennis and swim center, Head Start classrooms, play fields and a theater in the heart of the district. Kehoe leveraged funds to build two new elementary schools and expand an extended day care program. After years of delay, she was able to jumpstart the construction of Interstate 15 through the middle of San Diego.

In 2000, after successive elections to the city council, the last one garnering nearly 80 percent of the vote, Kehoe felt the pull of higher office. The 76th Assembly District was an open seat and Kehoe decided to run. The district, socially moderate and fiscally conservative, took in much of Kehoe's city council turf. She was a shoo-in.

"I think the voters saw me moving from the city council to the Assembly as a natural progression. They had come to think of me as a pretty consistent voice over time."

During her first term in the State Assembly, Kehoe distinguished herself by becoming the second woman ever to be elected Speaker pro Tempore, the Assembly's second highest-ranking position. Her legislative victories included protecting the San Diego

River by forming a conservancy, promoting water and energy conservation and outlawing the zone pricing of gasoline.

Then in September 2004, Governor Schwarzenegger signed a Kehoe-sponsored bill that required health plans to provide registered domestic partners the same levels of coverage enjoyed by married couples.

When the 39th Senate District seat opened up that year, there was

With Jane Goodall, founder of the Jane Goodall Institute.



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little doubt that Kehoe would step into the void left by termed-out State Senator Dede Alpert. Her opponent was Larry Stirling, the former Assemblyman and superior court judge who was attempting a political comeback.

Stirling tried to portray Kehoe as a "far left" ideologue out of touch with the district, but times had changed. The 39th District had been redrawn. Two-thirds of it fell within the city of San Diego. Registered Democrats

outnumbered registered Republicans 40 percent to 34 percent.

Kehoe ended up winning the race rather easily—60 percent to 35 percent. "Larry was a strong candidate, but his arguments didn't stick for a reason. Yes, I have my own conscience that guides certain votes. If I disagree with the majority of my constituents on an issue, say immigration, I tend to vote my conscience. But most times, I see eye-to-eye with my constituents, and I listen to them."

Kehoe chairs the Senate Appropriations Committee. She sits on the Banking and Financial Institutions Committee, the Environmental Quality Committee, the Governance and Finance Committee, the Natural Resources and Water Committee and the Transportation and Housing Committee.

As a senator, she has emerged as an important voice on behalf of the environment and good governance. In 2007, in the wake of wildfires that devoured large swaths of Southern California, she drafted a handful of bills to protect homeowners, compensate local governments for their wildfire fighting costs and, to prevent the spread of future blazes.

She also led efforts to reform the San Diego County Regional Airport Authority, strengthen the San Diego River Conservancy and protect open space in the city that has become her own.

Kehoe terms out at the end of 2012. As she gazes back, some political observers are looking forward to her one day running for Congress. "Do I have a hankering to run for Congress? Not this morning," she replies. "You know the old saying, 'You never say never in politics.' But it's not on my to-do list right now." ❖