

MARK LENO



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Unconventional Politics

SAN FRANCISCO—Even here, in a city accustomed to unconventional politics, Mark Leno is no conventional politician.

Milwaukee boy, rabbinical school dropout, San Francisco transplant, printer by trade, the first openly gay male to ever serve in the California State Senate. Not your run-of-the-mill legislative bio, for sure.

But it's not until he walks into the conference hall at the Holiday Inn in downtown San Francisco and starts working the room—in this case the 18th annual convention of the Hemp Industry Association—that you begin to appreciate just how refreshingly different Leno is.

It's safe to say that most politicians don't lie awake at night thinking of ways to make the hemp crowd happy. Unlike its cannabis cousin, hemp isn't grown anywhere in the country, legally or illegally. The men and women pushing the virtues of hemp oil, seed and fiber hardly

qualify as a lobby.

But there they were gathered in the hotel's Soma Room, its perimeter adorned with hemp jackets and hemp dresses and hemp Christmas stockings, to applaud the senator's determined efforts to legalize the farming of hemp in California. His legislative agenda may have been filled with far more weighty matters, but there he stood before hemp's forty true believers.

Sen. Leno had somehow managed to persuade two of the most conservative law enforcement officials in rural California, the sheriffs of Kern and Kings Counties, to embrace hemp as the good seed of cannabis. The two lawmen had ended up writing letters in support of the bill—no easy feat for a politician from San Francisco.

Mark Leno has a way of reaching across the political divide and disarming not just conservatives but those on the far right who would

seem predisposed to regard his views and identity with antipathy. Because he carries his beliefs with such deep conviction, but rarely strident, they sense genuineness about him, whether the issue is same-sex marriage or his fight for single-payer universal health care in California.

“I happen to be gay, I happen to be Jewish, I happen to be a small business owner, I happen to be liberal. It's all part of my identity. I've never run from who I am, and each piece is as important to my identity as the other. I'd like to think even my critics respect that.”

His bio says Leno is sixty years old, born before Eisenhower even ran for president, but from the front row, he appears at least a decade younger.

A product of Milwaukee, Leno was shaped by a city more liberal than one might expect. The nation's beer capital, Milwaukee was an immigrant town made famous by Schlitz and Braves pitcher Warren Spahn and all

those progressives who turned it into America's hub of the Socialist Party in the first half of the 20th Century. They were hardly anarchists. Known as the "Sewer Socialists," they dedicated themselves to a platform that kept the sewer, water and electrical systems running, at all costs.

Leno grew up as the middle child and only son of Manny and Esther Leno. Both sides of the family were Russian Jews who came to America between 1910 and 1916. Manny ran an office machinery business; Esther was a stay-at-home mom. Like so many suburban Jews of the 1950s and 60s, they attended a Reform Temple and didn't keep a Kosher home. Yiddish was the language of secrets.

"I had a great childhood, a lot of positive memories. In high school, I was a well socialized kid who ran for office every year and somehow won, president of my freshman class, treasurer of the student council in the 10th grade, president of the junior class and president of the student council my senior year."

Even before he graduated from high school in 1969, Leno had more than an inkling of his sexual orientation. In his small sphere, he had a difficult time pointing to an example of a gay man, at least one who was out of the closet or depicted as something other than a caricature. At 18, despite feeling isolated and different, he took his first steps to come out. He looks back with awe at the courage of that kid, seeing himself in the third-person.

"I marvel at it sometimes, that such a young man could determine with certainty, unequivocally, that every message he was receiving from faith leaders, political leaders, his parents, everybody, was completely counter to what he believed and understood in his core. At 18, he could say to himself. 'No, I am right. They are wrong.'

"People have different definitions of when they identify that day—the day they declare themselves to themselves. Yes, there were lots of tears and pain and hard work that took place before that kid found his footing. But he could determine back then what he wanted that footing to be."

Leno chose to attend the University of Colorado at Boulder—for no greater reason than it was far from Milwaukee and a couple of friends were going there. The



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prolonging of the Vietnam War had unleashed a fury of activism on college campuses across the country, and Boulder was no exception. Leno decided to apply for Conscientious Objector status, and in November 1969, he hopped into a VW van with a handful of other schoolmates and headed west to San Francisco for a massive anti-war rally. It was the first time he set eyes on the city.

"I remember crossing the Golden Gate Bridge on a damp, foggy day and heading into the park. There

was all this incense and aromatics in the air, music, the beat of drums, very spirited. I was still in the process of coming out as a gay man. In the midst of all these hippies and activists, there was a lot of flamboyance, people in chiffon and purple and pink costumes, sheets of fabric that blew in the wind. They were embracing themselves.

"It was the first time I had seen such a public declaration in my life. It was very liberating, of course, but I hadn't yet come out to the people I was traveling with, so I had to keep this recognition, this pride, to myself."

The following spring, on a trip to Los Angeles, Leno had his first relationship. "Then the truth started to unfold with family members, close friends, other relatives, other friends. Yes, my coming out is a California story. It is woven into California. It happened in California."

After a year in Boulder, he returned to Milwaukee and enrolled at the University of Wisconsin. He soon found himself impatient with his studies, smitten with Thoreau and a desire to experience life off-the-beaten track. His search for his own Walden Pond turned up a small island in the Caribbean—the most southern of the Grenadine Islands, a place called Bequia. He joined the crew of a charter boat company, learned how to raise an anchor, set sails, cook and clean.

It was there on the island that he came to the realization that returning to college didn't necessarily mean returning to the U.S. He could combine his love for travel and other cultures and still get a useful degree by attending the American College in Jerusalem. So he ventured to the Middle East in January 1972, a time of particular turmoil, the '67 War still fresh and the Yom Kippur War just ahead.

"It was a fascinating time for me. I

floated very much between the Israeli and Arab worlds. I got to see both sides. I had a lot of Arab friends. But all that changed dramatically after war broke out again.”

Leno earned his psychology degree in Jerusalem and became so fascinated with religion, his own Judaism in particular, that he committed to a five-year course of Rabbinical studies at Hebrew Union College in New York—the first year in Jerusalem and the next four years in New York.

“I was going to need a vocation, and I had this very keen spiritual curiosity, so it made sense to me. But I went in with a question hanging over me, a question I could not answer at first: ‘Could I be a sexually active gay man and a rabbi at the same time?’ There was nowhere to look, no one to turn to ask or find out. There were absolutely no role models. In fact, the seminary I attended did not ordain an out-gay man as a rabbi for another 10 years.”

Leno dropped out of the program during the second year. It was the beginning of the most challenging period of his life. “I was without direction. I started doubting my worth and esteem. And there were a lot of negative messages of who I was, and my honesty about it. I was really struggling to find a purpose in life. That’s when I came to San Francisco.”

His move to the city in 1977 happened to be the same year that Harvey Milk won a seat on the county board of supervisors, the first openly gay elected official in California history. Leno found an apartment in the Tenderloin and a job selling men’s clothing. He took up long distance running, his “salvation” as he calls it, and was soon competing in marathon races.

It was then that his father, whose relationship with his son had been

frayed since his coming out, shared with Leno an idea for a sign making business. Leno found it intriguing and began doing research. He took out a \$15,000 loan, rented shop space and bought a flatbed press with hard type that could churn out large-lettered signs for local businesses. This was a time, before computers, when commercial signs were either hand lettered or silk screened in quantities.

Budget Signs was thus born, churning out signs for Bay Area



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reality companies, bank branches, conventions and conferences. “I realized the multiple branches of savings and loans could use my signs. These are the signs that when you walk into a branch they appear in a stand with a frame. Well, the branches were changing these signs every week, so it was steady money. And I could print the signs at a better price point than anyone else.”

As the business took off, Leno found his relationship with his father growing stronger. “It wasn’t as if my

father reacted terribly to my coming out. It was more that he had no reference point, no experience with gay people. And then there was his real worry about what I was going to do with my life. So when I showed the initiative to start my own business, it gave him enormous pride. He was a small business owner, and now I was a small business owner, too.”

One day in 1980, a handsome young man named Douglas Jackson walked into Leno’s shop to order signs to promote a disco party marking the opening of the Municipal Metro line from Van Ness to Castro. Leno printed the signs, went to the party and ending up falling in love with Jackson. They became partners in business and life, working side by side at Budget Signs and living in a cozy blue home on Clipper Street in Noe Valley, until June 1990, when Jackson died of AIDS.

As the business grew and Leno could hire more staff, he joined local Democratic clubs and volunteered his time for non-profit groups, pouring his passion into raising money for HIV causes and gay and lesbian rights. “I found out a very dangerous thing about myself. I had a talent for fund raising. It’s very dangerous because everyone wants you to be on their board of directors.” Leno was so skilled at fundraising that Budget Signs became a must-stop for a growing list of gay and lesbian candidates—future friends and rivals Harry Britt and Carole Migden among them.

As a member of Congregation Sha’ar Zahav, with its large LGBT membership, Leno became an important intermediary between the gay and lesbian Jewish community and elected officials. It was in this role that he first caught the attention of mayoral candidate Willie Brown in the mid 1990s.

In 1998, the Board of Supervisors

found itself with another vacancy. Outgoing supervisor Susan Leal, a Latina and a lesbian, had been elected county treasurer. Mayor Brown promised to find a replacement of the same gender, race and sexual orientation. This was no small order—a Latina lesbian who could drop what she was doing and work 70 hours a week in a job that paid thirty grand and who had the name recognition needed to win an election that was seven months away and required a quarter million dollars to fund.

A month later, Willie called a press conference and introduced his choice: Mark Leno.

“I thanked the mayor for his trust in me and for this important appointment, recognizing that I was not his first choice but hoping that I was at the top of his list of gay, Jewish, small business owners,” Leno recalled with a chuckle.

So began his political career. Despite all the class presidencies in high school, Leno felt deeply ambivalent. “I had never done public policy before. I didn’t know if I could attend to the responsibilities at City Hall and keep my business running. I didn’t know that I could take the political heat. I didn’t know if I would even like public life.”

As it turned out, Leno was a natural. He plunged right into neighborhood frays—the debate over the size of a Rite Aid sign on 24th Street and a proposed ban on coffee shops and specialty grocery stores in the area, using his steady temperament to craft consensus between merchants and neighborhood groups.

In a tight race in 2000, he kept his supervisor’s seat and used it as a platform to compel residential developers to build more affordable housing and to slow down the construction of “monster homes”

that dwarfed the other houses on the block. “About a year into it, I realized that I loved the legislative process, and I was pretty good at it,” he said.

By 2002, his ambivalence turned into ambition, and Leno set his sights on the 13th Assembly District seat—San Francisco’s east side—held by Carole Migden, who was termed out. His opponent was none other than former supervisor Harry Britt, the legendary civil rights and gay activist who had served as Harvey



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Milk’s successor to the county board. Indeed, it was Milk himself, writing in his will, who had named Britt as his political heir.

A fierce progressive backed by big labor and tenant groups, Britt had been out of office for more than a decade and pledged to challenge Leno from the left. Leno faced a delicate balancing act: he had to stake out his own positions on housing, education, health care and energy without painting Britt as an out-of-touch relic from the pioneering days

of the gay rights struggle.

The campaign was bitterly fought and split the LGBT community. On election night, as the results showed Leno winning by four percentage points, he was surrounded by his parents and sister Jamie at a gay and lesbian community center he helped found. “It was a dream of Harvey Milk that one day a gay man would serve in the state Assembly,” Leno told his supporters. “We are going to Sacramento,” he shouted. The crowd roared.

In Leno’s first year in the Assembly, his bill to add gender identity to the Fair Employment and Housing Act was signed into law by Gov. Gray Davis. In 2005, Leno authored the nation’s first bill to give same-sex couples the freedom to marry, only to see Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger veto it. Undeterred, Leno worked to get the same bill passed two years later, but Schwarzenegger vetoed it again.

“We beat New York by six years getting that law to the governor’s desk,” Leno said. “Unfortunately, we didn’t have Andrew Cuomo as our governor.”

As Leno’s two terms in the Assembly wound down, he wasn’t sure what his next step would be—in or out of politics. His desire to run for state senate was complicated by the presence of incumbent Carole Migden.

Leno took the bold step of challenging Migden and defeated her by 15 percentage points in the primary, running strong not only in San Francisco but in Marin and Sonoma counties, as well. On election night in Nov. 2008, he easily outdistanced his Republican challenger with 80% of the vote. President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg showered the rookie senator with not one but two committee chairmanships—public safety and a

budget subcommittee on health and human services.

Today, Sen. Leno calls universal health care “one of the most important civil rights issue of our time.” Indeed, he has emerged as one of the most articulate and knowledgeable voices in California on the need for a single-payer system of health care. Off the top of his head, he cites even the smallest details of the case—the fact that we waste one-third of our health care dollars on administrative costs, that Medicare’s overhead is a mere five percent, that we rank 37th among nations worldwide in cost, quality and access to health care and in life expectancy and infant mortality rates. In other

words, we rank just above Slovenia.

“We have over 60,000 different health plans in the state of California. If we had just one, there would be huge savings. By providing health care for all, we would be investing in primary and preventive care and keeping the population healthier. This would be another huge savings. Making sure everyone has a primary care physician would mean less use of the most expensive health care—the county emergency room.”

In 1960, the U.S. spent only five percent of our gross national product on health care. Today, we’re fast approaching 25 percent. “No other country does health care like we do. Just imagine the most ill-conceived,

ill-fated health system putting a ‘for profit’ middleman in between the consumer and the provider, a middleman who provides no health care, does no health care research, provides not a single hospital bed.

“This middleman makes millions in profits by denying us health care. Let’s put him in charge. And that’s what we have. And it makes absolutely no sense.”

Whether it is hemp or health care for all, this is the same passion, dedication and optimism the San Francisco politician brings to nearly every issue he tackles in the Legislature. ❖