Published on *Gay-Straight Alliance Network* (http://www.gsanetwork.org)

California, Other States Prepare to Honor Milk

SAN FRANCISCO ? Presidential Medal of Freedom? Got that. A place in the California Hall of Fame and Sean Penn playing you on-screen? Those, too.

Now, Harvey Milk has a holiday of sorts to call his own. California will observe its first day of "special significance" Saturday honoring the slain gay rights leader on what would have been his 80th birthday.

It took two legislative tries and the 2008 movie "Milk" to help persuade Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to sign a bill last fall establishing May 22 as Harvey Milk Day. Memorial events are planned in 20 other states.

The California measure does not close state offices as an official holiday would but does encourages public schools to conduct activities commemorating the first openly gay man elected to public office in a major U.S. city.

Milk was a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1978 when he and Mayor George Moscone were assassinated at City Hall by former supervisor Dan White.

Milk preached a message of pride that made him an inspiration to generations of gay rights activists, and he is credited with helping defeat a ballot initiative that would have prevented gay teachers from working in public schools.

The range of activities planned in his memory ? concerts, voter canvassing to repeal California's gay marriage ban, and students at some schools handing out malted milk balls and Milk Duds ? speaks to Milk's singularly iconic place in gay rights history and the public's continued polarization on gay rights issues.

The day is shaping up to be even grander than its supporters anticipated. Demonstrations in St. Louis, Savannah, Ga., Fulton, Miss., and other cities are aimed at putting pressure on Congress to repeal the ban on gays serving openly in the military and to pass a law protecting gays and transgender people from job discrimination.

"The creation of the first official day of recognition for any openly gay person in the history of this

country has really touched people, many of whom have been closeted in life or faced rejection or government discrimination which continues to this day," said Geoffrey Kors, executive director of the gay rights group Equality California.

In Milk's adopted home state, however, few public schools are marking the occasion, despite the language in the California bill that created it.

Having May 22 fall on a Saturday this year may have muted the celebrations. But a conservative group's call for parents to pull their children out of class if any Harvey Milk activities were planned probably had an effect as well, said Carolyn Laub, executive director of the Gay-Straight Alliance Network, a San Francisco group that trains students to be gay rights advocates.

"We have heard from students and teachers who are facing resistance from school administrators who do not want to acknowledge this day," Laub said.

Some students decided to sponsor movie screenings and other activities at lunch or after school in the absence of school-wide events, she said.

Zac Toomay, a 17-year-old junior at Arroyo Grande High School in central California, said he was surprised when his principal agreed to encourage history and English teachers to mention Milk during classes Friday.

"I encountered some apprehension, not because the principal or teachers are uncomfortable with it, but because they didn't want to have too much of a controversy within the classroom," Toomay said. "I said, 'We have controversy in the classroom all the time, and if we are going to avoid that one, we are going to have to avoid all of them.'"

At in San Juan Hills High School in Orange County, Calif., where scheduled state achievement tests prevented classroom activities, 15-year-old Benji Delgadillo and other members of the school's Gay-Straight Alliance Club planned to sell Harvey milkshakes and to hand out fliers after school explaining who Milk was.

Besides Delgadillo, San Juan Hills only has one or two other openly gay or transgender students, he said. The club of about 25 members nevertheless persuaded the principal to change the dress code for dances so girls could wear suits and to cancel the annual "Battle of the Sexes" pep rally after some students said it was offensive to gender non-conforming students.

"Harvey Milk is a civil rights icon who sparked a movement that today is really helping to address the issues of harassment that lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or gender non-conforming students face in our school and our community," Delgadillo said.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was scheduled to appear at a fundraiser Friday night tied to Harvey Milk Day and benefiting Equality California's political action committee, which hopes to qualify a ballot initiative in 2012 that would repeal California's ban on same-sex marriage.

Events planned for Saturday include the premiere of a musical based on Milk's life written by Dustin Lance Black, the screenwriter who won an Oscar for "Milk" the movie, and performed by

the Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles. The chorus plans to take the piece into high schools next year as part of project to prevent anti-gay bullying.

Stuart Milk, Harvey Milk's 49-year-old nephew and one of the guardians of his legacy, thinks his uncle would be thrilled by the various tributes, but he also wants his day to be more about uniting all marginalized minorities than merely about gay rights or the accomplishments of one man.

"It's still a hard concept for people to get," Stuart Milk said. "This isn't about having a Harvey Milk curriculum in every school. It's an opportunity to talk about what discrimination means and why it's important for everyone to feel included."

Copyright © 2010 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

May. 21, 2010
http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5hv5BjpsThh... [1]
News Article
Presidential Medal of Freedom? Got that...
Associated Press
Lisa Leff

Source URL: http://www.gsanetwork.org/news/california-other-states-prepare-honor-milk/052110

Links:
[1] http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5hv5BjpsThhv-Hq15G5Ke_-8PgngQD9FRERA00