

If There's a Political Campaign, Expect to See John Laird  
By Don Monkerud

*All communities depend upon citizens to participate in the many commissions, boards, and electoral offices to function. Santa Cruz has a disproportionate number of such concerned citizens. City Council meetings occasionally have large crowds and have moved from Chamber offices to the Civil Auditorium. John Laird not only participated in many local organizations and devoted innumerable hours to volunteering, he successfully ran for office. He was one of the first gay men to become the mayor of a city in the United States, served six years in the State Assembly, eight years as a Cabinet Secretary for Governor Jerry Brown, and is in his third year representing the Central Coast in the State Senate.*

In November 1983 it was time for a celebration. Not only had his council candidates won, but he would also become the next mayor. After a long, arduous campaign, he could relax at last. But not quite.

The following week, newspapers around the state and the nation carried a story about him being one of the first elected gay mayors in California. John Laird, the first openly gay person elected as mayor, would face what he calls a “media riot.” His phone didn’t stop ringing as reporters clamored for interviews. The Paul Harvey news covered his election. His story became an item on local and national TV news, and letters flooded in.

“I never intended this to happen,” says John. “It wasn’t deliberate, but I was happy to have the story out and be able to deal with it. I was comfortable with being gay, but my contract was with the people of Santa Cruz, a promise that I would be a good mayor.”

Throughout the interviews, John focused on a bill in the California State Legislature, sponsored by Art Agnos (D) San Francisco, that would end discrimination in employment based on sexual orientation. Fully knowledgeable and experienced in local government, John had done everything he could to avoid bias because of his sexual

orientation.

The matter of John's sexual orientation wasn't an issue in the election in Santa Cruz and only came up after Jack Foley, a reporter from the *San Jose Mercury News*, took John to lunch for an interview and asked if he was gay. John jokes that only 6,000 to 7,000 people in Santa Cruz knew. He had endorsements from gay and lesbian groups in the city but didn't see any other candidates calling a press conference to proclaim their sexual orientations. He saw no need to do so. *The Phoenix*, a weekly Santa Cruz newspaper, did run a front-page story wondering whether John would be a single-issue candidate focusing on gay issues. Still, John had too much experience in all areas of county government for the story to be taken seriously by the voters. The conservatives split over whether to make it an issue in the campaign and ended up ignoring it.

"The significant thing that came from the election wasn't about my career but the coalition that won," reflects John. "It brought neighborhoods, women's groups, labor, peace groups, gay and lesbian groups, students, affordable housing supporters and others together. Voters elected Mardi Wormhoudt and I to join Mike Rotkin to the city council, and for the first time, there was a non-conservative majority. That hasn't shifted in the years since."

Because John hadn't considered that his parents hadn't told their friends he was gay, his outing had unexpected personal consequences. His brother, also gay, called to say Wendy Tokuda was calling him an avowed homosexual on a Bay Area TV newscast. "It's like a funeral around here," his brother, the family comedian, hooted. "People are bringing casseroles." His parents already knew he was gay, and discussing his private life on TV brought surprising and uplifting results. One woman wrote thanking him. She had three gay sons, and John would make their lives easier. His mother received a letter from a friend saying she had always snickered when Harvey Milk, the gay San Francisco supervisor, came on TV. She knew the Lairds were a loving family and realized their private lives weren't anyone's business. She would never snicker at a gay again.

The immediate events leading up to John's election and nine years, from 1981 to 1990, on the city council grew out of his disappointment trying to work with the conservative-dominated council. In 1976, he became part of a blue ribbon city committee to review the city charter. Made up of former mayors and other experienced members, the

committee took a year to draft the proposed changes. But the handwriting was on the wall, and change was in the air. The conservative majority that had held sway over city politics since the city's founding was on the way out, and they did everything they could to prevent the change. The council angered many in the community by ignoring the draft of proposed changes. John sat through city council meetings and knew he had the skills and knowledge to do a better job than they were doing. Except he was gay, and Harvey Milk, a gay San Francisco city council member, had just been killed, essentially for being gay. Could John ever hope to run for political office?

John was facing a choice and admitted it was difficult for him. He had worked in county government, in highly responsible, stressful jobs, for six years, first on a congressional district staff and then as an analyst for Santa Cruz County. In 1974, he began working directly for the chief administrator of county government, assigned to health and social service programs. This was the first time revenue-sharing grants were given. John administered the contracts for fifty non-profits, coordinating all procedure phases, from grant applications to board funding and reporting. He learned how county government worked—county procedures, budgets, and the financial details of Santa Cruz County. This period became an intense learning experience. Involvement in public policy requires working with different people to make things work. Issues need to be defined clearly. Good interpersonal relations are a must, and solid groundwork is necessary to bring people together. Joining a drop-in gay men's group that met on Monday nights in Loudon Nelson Community Center boosted his self-confidence. He brought the skills he learned together in his public and personal life, which served him well when he ran for the city council.

“At first, only ten to twelve men showed up for the meeting, but the group quickly grew to seventy-five to ninety men,” recalls John. “We would break up and talk in small groups and then meet as a full group; I developed self-confidence in those meetings. These were men in the community: doctors, bus drivers, lawyers, waiters, teachers, and a whole mix of people who, to this day, are still some of my best friends. We bonded. The group created a real turning point because it made us understand how much power we had when we all came together. We developed a comfort level because we could fall back on other men from every walk of life, and it was less risky to be openly gay and out there

at the time.”

The group was saddened and shocked when San Francisco city supervisor Dan White got a light sentence for gunning down Harvey Milk. John watched the news just before attending a gay group meeting, and he arrived to find some of the other men so shaken they couldn't talk about it. Others were so angry they piled into cars and drove to San Francisco to protest. The shooting occurred just at the time when John was wondering whether to enter politics himself. If such a high-profile supervisor could be gunned down, how could he establish a political life himself? If Harvey Milk couldn't make it, could anyone? It became a great personal dilemma.

“Harvey Milk's death followed on the heels of my political coalition work and my advocacy on public policy issues, water, transit, and other issues,” John explains. “With his death, I realized I had to choose between being openly gay and comfortable in my life or never holding a high rank in government, whether by appointment or election.”

John took a year off to travel to Mexico, Guatemala, and Bolivia and mulled over what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. He studied Spanish and wrestled with his dilemma. During the trip, he realized that if Harvey Milk's death and other's opposition to gays discouraged him, he was giving those who discriminated and hated control over his life. If they prevented him from running, they would be rewarded for excluding others from the political process.

“They didn't deserve to be rewarded,” says John. “I came back to Santa Cruz feeling liberated. I was comfortable with myself and had support from an active gay community.” At last, he reconciled his interest in politics with being gay.

Upon his return, John had barely settled into his job before a controversy rocked the community. Undercover police entrapped sixteen men in Capitola and arrested them for being gay. The *Sentinel* and the *Pajaronian* published their names and home addresses. The gay community was enraged, as were others. John and Jerry Solomon, a local therapist, visited the Capitola police chief to point out the outrageousness of the arrests.

“We had a two-hour appointment, and he talked for an hour and fifty-five minutes,” John recalls. We couldn't get a word in edgewise.”

Undaunted, John helped set up three-person teams, a resident of Capitola, a gay

man or lesbian, and an attorney or business owner, to talk to Capitola city council members. One threw them out of his business; most refused to meet with them. Pushing on, the group planned to attend a Capitola city council meeting. Two-hundred-and-fifty people, including representatives from legal groups, the Gray Panthers, gay and lesbian activists, and other community groups, argued that gays shouldn't be entrapped or targeted by the police. The council agreed to seek training for the police and to stop the entrapment, although John points out that they later undermined their agreement. Looking around the room that night, John realized the power people held when they organized. He decided to try to focus on this power and, the following year, ran for Santa Cruz City Council.

His political blossoming became a long journey. John grew up in the working-class town of Vallejo on the Carquinez Straits, where his father was a teacher and principal in the small sugar-refining town of Crockett. The city had a diverse ethnic mix of African-American, Filipino-American, and working-class whites. He entered school in 1955 and graduated with the same group of kids in 1968. Out of a high school graduating class of three-hundred-and-fifty students, just fifteen continued on to a four-year college. He describes his high school experience as straight out of the movie *Hairspray*, where girls wore beehive hairdos, kids smoked in the bathrooms, and the fight for civil rights was in your front yard. Life was real and down-to-earth, which prepared John for everything in his later life.

John's parents met while attending the University of South Dakota. His father, the son of the head of the plumber's union local and a phone operator, was the first Laird in his family to go to college and also the first Laird in five generations to leave Danville, Illinois. On his mother's side, his grandparents moved from the Midwest to Cotati, where his grandfather maintained a small ranch on the Gravenstein Highway and managed a lumberyard. His grandmother was one of California's last grade school teachers without a college degree.

John's father, a high school principal, participated in every community activity and coached a championship high school basketball team. Most of these activities included the family. John had two younger brothers and grew up playing baseball and basketball in the streets with other kids, attending Saturday afternoon cinema, and living

a normal childhood.

Between his junior and senior years in high school, John entered a foreign studies program in Spain, living with an attorney's family. This life-changing experience made him question everything in his life, including wanderlust. Since then, he has traveled to 46 states and 50 countries; he travels yearly, exploring different cultures around the world.

John dated girls in high school and took a good friend, a Korean-Chinese American woman, who later became one of the first to visit Cuba with the Venceremos Brigade, to the prom. It was an interracial date, but he didn't consider it such then, for he grew up in a household dedicated to civil rights. His father wasn't outspoken—the only bumper sticker John recalls his father putting on the family car was in support of fair housing—but his father quit the local church when the congregation indicated they wouldn't accept a black minister. John fit in and got along with everyone.

“The only thing that set me apart from many other kids was that I was an avid reader,” John explains. “Plus, I was always interested in current affairs. I kept a scrapbook on the Kennedy-Nixon campaign when I was ten. A senior in 1968, I spent six months working on Eugene McCarthy's campaign, my first active political campaign.”

A serious student, John had the top G.P.A. among boys and enrolled at UCSC, which was in its fourth year. Nixon bombed Cambodia in 1969, and the peace movement was in full swing. John attended teach-ins and demonstrations in Berkeley, 20 miles away from Vallejo, and got involved in anti-war protests. In 1970, he went with 75 students to Washington, D.C., to lobby Congress against the war, his first experience with tear gas during a May Day demonstration. In 1970, he served as a Contra Costa County staff member on the Jerry Waldie congressional campaign, and in the summer of 1971, he went to Washington, D.C., as an intern for Pete McCloskey, who ran as a peace candidate against Nixon in the primaries.

“Tear gas was a real eye-opening experience,” John said. “We spent two weeks lobbying legislators, the state department, anyone who would talk to us about the war. It led me to return to Washington the following year and work for an anti-war candidate. Politics were an integral part of college, and anti-war activity was at its heart.”

The year 1972 was an active time for the anti-war movement at UCSC. In

February, John organized a campus meeting for George McGovern, the peace candidate, that drew 80 students to help on the campaign. McGovern took over 90 percent of the campus vote, followed by Shirley Chisholm, another anti-war candidate from New York, and Hubert Humphrey in third place. His work for McGovern led to his becoming a delegate to the 1972 Democratic Convention in Miami Beach, Florida.

John recalls the spring of 1972 sit down on Highway One, although he missed being arrested because he was working at campus food services to pay his tuition. After the police arrested one hundred and seventy-five people, he arrived in time to join a march to the jail. He watched the Tactical Squad run down the street to protect the Bank of America when students marched on it, the memory of the burning bank in Santa Barbara still fresh in their minds. During “a strange moment,” John recalls sitting as a city council member at a dinner honoring the retirement, after 25 years, of the police chief who presided over these arrests and enduring speakers referring to the event as the chief’s “finest hour.”

John realized he was gay during college. Although he dated women, he had no role models, and no one spoke about being gay. Slowly, he discovered that he was more attracted to men than women and credits the atmosphere in Santa Cruz with allowing people to discover their sexual orientation without angst-creating social pressure. For example, in 1975, Santa Cruz was the first county in the nation to ban discrimination of county employees based on sexual orientation. John’s sexual orientation made no difference in the local political scene.

Active on the Inter College Board as one of two representatives from Stevenson College, John recalled the frustration of students without a real student government. The chancellor controlled students’ decisions, which led to their becoming uproariously irreverent. They abolished the council. At every student council meeting, they passed a resolution demanding that the U.S. immediately withdraw from Vietnam. While a great comedy, UCSC also had a serious side; it forced him to think critically, write, and seriously apply himself to his studies. Additionally, he focused on studying politics.

His senior thesis, a study of the history of water development in California, examined environmental issues: where water was diverted, the effect of diversions on the San Jacquin River delta, social issues created by subsidized water, the support of large

agri-business as opposed to family farms, and other financial and political issues. The thesis weighed in at 160 pages.

“The thesis surprised me,” John admits. “I had no idea doing a thesis on that topic would change the rest of my life. I was always an enviro, and a coastie – and that central valley agriculture interests and urban southern California drove water policy. I never thought I would be the cabinet secretary responsible for state water supply.”

After graduation, John took a position with Congressman Jerry Waldie, when he became a candidate for governor, and whom he had interviewed for his senior thesis. John brought environmental expertise to the staff because Waldie was one of the few candidates speaking out on land ownership patterns in agriculture and environmental degradation caused by diverting water from the San Jacquin Delta. This experience later helped John when he worked on the Joint Powers Agreement, a region-wide study of land use and water for Santa Cruz County.

After Waldie lost his bid for governor, John took a job on a day’s notice and became field director for a Florida congressman’s campaign for the U.S. Senate. Florida was a foreign area with two separate campaigns: one in the cosmopolitan Miami-Fort Lauderdale area and the other in the more rural, southern regions. He considered accepting a job in Washington because the congressman expected to win the race, but when he didn’t, John returned to Berkeley. Upon his return, John received a call from Santa Cruz offering him a job. It was perfect for John because, although he had moved to Berkeley, he continued to spend his weekends in Santa Cruz.

In addition to working in the personnel office for Santa Cruz County, John maintained an active political life. Since his college days, he wrote on politics for newspapers and, for years, produced a regular column on the editorial page of the *Sentinel*. A prolific op-ed writer, he became a regular contributor to the *Lavender Reader*, a quarterly gay journal, and produced a prodigious amount for local political campaigns. A campaign would find him authoring fundraising letters for eight different candidates. He ghosted three ballot statements for the fall 2000 campaign and edited documents for SCAN and the Sierra Club.

In 1996, John hosted a weekly program, *Talk of the Bay*, on KUSP, where he invited public figures to discuss topics of political interest. Topics include water usage,



transportation, and the effect of the Cisco development in San Jose on Santa Cruz County. Such public exposure invariably brought him in contact with others who thanked him for being brave enough to come out as openly gay and allow them to become more readily accepted. At the same time, John devoted his whole life to improving the community's quality of life, which may be his most enduring legacy.

In the course of all this, in 1995 John met John Flores, and they have been together twenty-eight years, fifteen of them married, which became legal in 2008. John Flores is an watercolor artist and recently retired from a forty year career in hair styling. "He is the best thing that happened to me – and as I have moved on to the state stage as a legislator and cabinet secretary, he's provided a good balance in life."

But John's heart is was always in Santa Cruz and it's future. "Santa Cruz is a unique mixture of beautiful environment, affordable surroundings, a university, proximity to San Francisco, and a small town feel that allows you to get to know people and appreciate their differences," he says. "We still rely upon many different people to make up the community. I worry about that being lost as the university grows, the Silicon Valley expands, and we provide new housing."