

Teacher's Guide to the Harvey Milk Story

I wrote this curriculum in part because none of my other stories are about queer issues – except, perhaps, the story about Rachel Carson – and in part because Harvey Milk's story is so beautiful and tragic. I chose Milk deliberately. In order not to shock more conservative students or let them write it off, I wanted a story that would gently introduce a high profile queer person with a “legitimate” job, someone widely praised and not too radical. Maybe next semester I'll write that story about Stonewall or Sylvia Rivera, but I'll still teach Harvey Milk first.

First, do “Conversation in San Francisco.” It's written very conversationally (“I bet,” “Yeah, that Harvey.”). Have students read it silently (briefly) and answer any questions. Then have students practice it in partners. Make sure you first model saying the respective sentences “[thinking]” and “[curious]” - ideally with some hand gestures to get them into basic acting. Then, after students finish reading the conversation, ask if any partners had a particularly good conversation. Surprise! Ask them to stand up and read it for the class, if they like. Finally, answer the questions at the bottom together.

This is a warm up to get students thinking and talking. It also introduces Harvey Milk as something other than just a gay man – he's a competent businessman and trusted community figure. The need for someone like this is intuitive to many working-class immigrants. Finally, it secretly puts students in the position of fellow gay business owners in the Castro.

Next, have students read the story. If they don't already know, you'll want to introduce the concept of city council. I did this by asking who was the leader of the US, and then asking who wrote the laws. I wrote “George W. Bush” on the board, and “Congress” right underneath. Next to and below, I wrote “Mayor” and “City Council,” and explained that this was the same thing for a city. **Trivia:** The city council in SF is called the Board of Supervisors, and its 11 members are referred to as (surprise!) Supervisors. I deliberately left this language out to avoid confusion.

Have students read the story silently. When they're finished, answer any questions they have. Then read it together. Stop after every paragraph and check for comprehension. My students struggled with, “He later wrote a law to make it illegal to *discriminate* against gay people in San Francisco.”

Just so you know, by all accounts Milk was a media-savvy pragmatist. He wouldn't let himself be pigeonholed as “the gay politician.” That's why he, very publicly, made his first legislation a pooper-scooper law. (At the press conference for it, he led reporters on a walk through the city to illustrate the problem, “accidentally” stepping in dog poop at the end.) About Proposition 6, the law Milk campaigned against which would've legalized firing all gay teachers in California: In addition to Harvey Milk, apparently then-Governor Ronald Reagan was also against it. I couldn't find the figures, but I got the impression it was trounced at the polls.

Harvey Milk and Mayor Moscone were assassinated by Dan White, who later killed

himself. I point that out for closure to the story, and to make it clear that there was no happy ending for anyone involved.

In my class, some students finish reading something this long much more quickly than others. The vocab questions in the back are for them, as is the coda to the story, “Remembering Harvey Milk.” This will give them something slightly more challenging to work on while other students are reading the main story. After going over “Harvey Milk,” briefly go over the questions on the back. They're too simple to linger over, but if you don't answer them, the students will often do them on their own while you're trying to move on.

Finally, have students answer the last five questions in small groups. If they have tons of energy you can still go over “Remembering Harvey Milk,” but I think that's good homework. The basic story is pretty deep, and takes a lot of energy.

As always, let me know if this was useful to you, and if you have any constructive criticism. My email is danspalding.esl@gmail.com . Thanks!

Solidarity,
Dan Spalding

Conversation in San Francisco, 1975

A: How's business today?

B: Business is good, but I can't make any money! My city taxes are too high!

A: Hey, me too! The city made me pay to start a new business, and now they want more money from me.

B: I have lots of customers, but I can't make any money.

A: I think a lot of us have this problem. What can we do?

B: Let's call Harvey. I bet he can do something.

A: Harvey who owns the camera shop?

B: Yeah, that Harvey. He knows how to talk to people in city government.

A: What can he do?

B: He can ask them to lower our taxes.

A: Let's do it. You talk to Harvey, and tonight I'll bring all the other business owners around here to a meeting at my restaurant.

Questions

1. Who's talking in this conversation? Who's Harvey?
2. Why do people think Harvey can solve their problems?
3. How else can Harvey help these people?

Harvey Milk

Harvey Milk is the most famous politician in San Francisco history. He only worked for 11 months, and he only wrote two laws. But today, millions of people know the exciting beginning and *tragic* end of Harvey Milk.

Harvey Milk was born in New York in 1930. He went to college and joined the military before he moved to San Francisco in 1972. Milk started a camera store with his lover, Scott Smith. Harvey Milk was one of many gay people who moved to San Francisco in the 1970s. In most cities in the US, it was dangerous to be gay. You could be fired – or *attacked*.



Harvey Milk helped other business owners in the neighborhood *negotiate* with the city. He was good at talking to business people and politicians. Soon, he *ran* for City Council. The City Council writes laws for the city. He lost three times, but in 1977, he was *elected*. He was the first politician elected in a big city who everyone knew was gay. But Milk didn't care only about gay people. He talked to everyone, and worked a lot with unions and Chinese people in San Francisco. The first law he wrote was to make people clean up after their dogs. He later wrote a law to make it illegal to *discriminate against* gay people in San Francisco.

In 1978, Harvey Milk fought against Proposition 6. Proposition 6 was a law to fire all gay teachers in California. Milk talked on TV and the radio about why this was a bad idea. Californians saw that he was smart, funny, and a good person. In 1978, California voted against Proposition 6.

Another City Council person was Dan White. He quit after the Council voted for Milk's law to stop discrimination against gay people. He was angry at the mayor and Harvey Milk. On November 27, 1978, he went into City Hall with a gun, and killed the mayor and Milk. Dan White went to jail for less than eight years. He killed himself 9 months after he got out of jail.

Harvey Milk was one of America's first gay heroes. Many people say he made them less afraid to be gay.

Vocabulary

1. *tragic* – adjective – Very sad. “The big earthquake in Asia was tragic.”
2. *attack* – verb – Start a fight. “Our dog attacked the neighbor's dog yesterday.”
3. *negotiate* – verb – To talk to someone to find something you can both agree on. “I negotiated with my boss to get a raise.”
4. *ran* – past tense verb – To try to get elected. “Obama and McCain ran for President in 2004.”
5. *elect* – verb – When people vote for you to be a politician. “George W. Bush was elected president twice.”
6. *discriminate against* – verb – To give someone a bad job or hurt them because of who they are. “It is illegal to discriminate against tenants because they have children.”

Vocabulary Practice

1. ___ <i>tragic</i>	A. To try to get elected.
2. ___ <i>attack</i>	B. To give someone a bad job or hurt them because of who they are.
3. ___ <i>negotiate</i>	C. Very sad.
4. ___ <i>run</i>	D. Start a fight.
5. ___ <i>elect</i>	E. The people in San Francisco who write the laws.
6. ___ <i>discriminate</i>	F. To talk to someone to try to find something you can agree on.
7. ___ _____	G. When people vote for you to be a politician.

Questions

1. Do you know about anyone else in America who had a tragic death?
2. Who in your country had a tragic death? What happened?
3. Why do you think Dan White went to jail for less than 8 years?
4. What was Proposition 6? Was it a good law? Are there laws like that today?
5. What's different today than in the 1970s? What's the same?

Remembering Harvey Milk

Everyone in San Francisco was *shocked* when Harvey Milk was killed. That night, about 50,000 people went to City Hall. Some carried candles to remember him.

In 1979, after Dan White was *sentenced* to less than 8 years, about a thousand gay people returned to City Hall. Some broke windows and started small fires in the building. Twelve police cars were also set on fire. The police arrested and hurt some people, and everyone left City Hall. Later, many police officers went to the Castro, a neighborhood in San Francisco where many gay people live. The Castro is far from City Hall. The police started a huge fight and many gay people fought back.



San Francisco City Hall, November 27, 1978

Harvey Milk recorded several tapes to play if he was killed. On one of them, he said that if he was killed, he wanted people to not be afraid to be gay.

Vocabulary

1. *shocked* – adjective – Surprised and feeling bad. “I was shocked when I got my hospital bill.”
2. *sentenced* – verb – When the judge says how long you have to go to jail.