

✓ mayors

Mayor John Laird on achieving in a straight world

by John Laird

IN AMERICAN society, each man and woman who comes to terms with being gay faces a unique set of circumstances and resulting pressures.

It has been no different for me. As an honors graduate in Politics from UCSC, a congressional assistant, a campaign operative in Florida, a national convention delegate, a local government manager and an active member of countless local organizations, I had long desired a career in politics and public service.

Yet, in the 1970s, such a career was not compatible with being openly gay. Then, as now, openly gay citizens were barred from the foreign service and the military, routinely lost child custody fights, and looked on helplessly as openly gay men and women were turned back at our borders for having "psychopathic disorders."

After exploring other career choices, I finally decided that it was the discrimination of others that was keeping me from doing what I both enjoy and do best. I decided to seek public office.

I had been active locally with gay and lesbian organizations, and listed gay affiliations with all others during

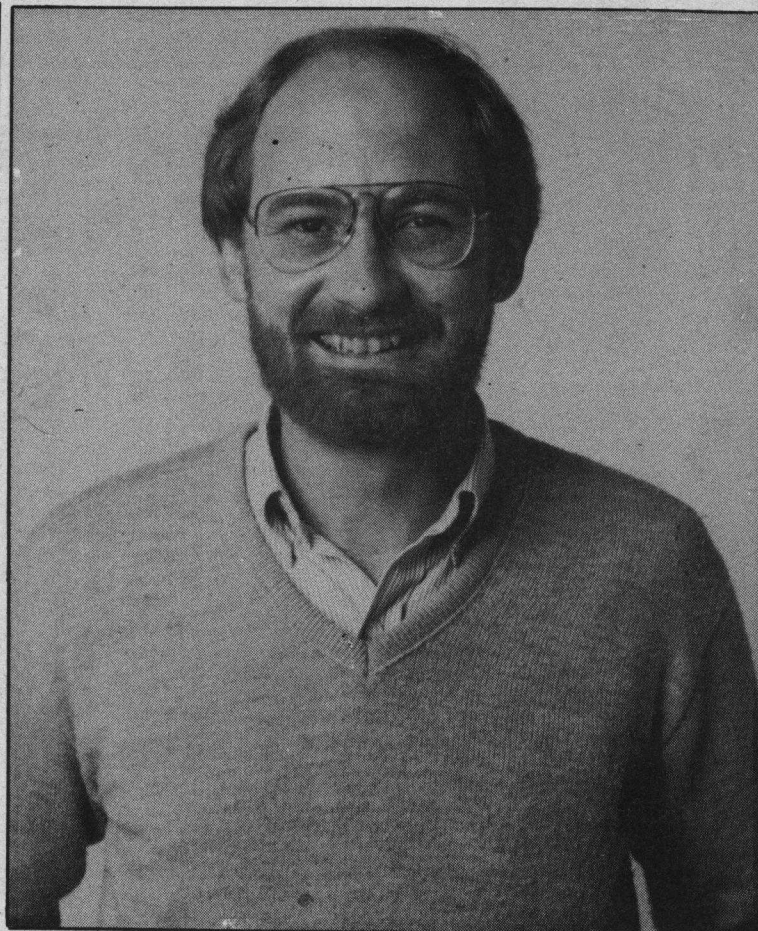
the 1981 City Council campaign. The *Phoenix* wondered in print whether I would be termed the "gay-issue candidate," but it never became an issue in the campaign.

During my first two years on the Council, the *San Jose Mercury News* referred to me as a "gay activist," and the *Sentinel* carried a front-page story on the formation of the Freedom Democratic Caucus that referred to me as a "gay rights activist."

Despite the Council's endorsement of AB 1, inclusion of non-discrimination in our largest labor contract and endorsement of more federal funding to fight AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), the matter of my personal life was never discussed at the Council.

No one ever asked me directly, about the subject, and I never felt that it was appropriate to make a public announcement on my own. When asked if I was openly gay prior to my election as mayor, I answered that "only five or 6,000 people knew."

It is a tradition that the local press features each incoming mayor with articles outlining the new mayor's agenda for the coming year. As the top vote-getter in 1981, and as Vice-Mayor, I was the odds-on favorite to



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succeed Bruce Van Allen in November, 1983.

Jack Foley of the *Mercury-News* arranged the first interview. After a few opening questions, he asked "Are you gay?" I said, "Yes," and the seeds were sown for a major, nationwide media riot.

Through the day of and the day after my election as mayor, I did interviews with countless newspaper, radio and television reports. It was the lead story on most San Francisco television news, and I burst out laughing when Channel 5's Wendy Tokuda referred to me as an "avowed

homosexual."

I heard from old friends in Los Angeles, Michigan, Indiana and Washington. And when phones began ringing off the hook from the East Coast, a caller informed me that Paul Harvey had gone after me on his nationwide radio show.

There were two negative letters, one unsigned. The other was addressed to Mayor Bruce Van Allen and expressed shock at the revelation that he was gay. I wrote back that I suspected Bruce Van Allen was probably equally shocked.

And the support was incredible. A mother of three gay sons wrote telling me she was proud of her sons and me. A friend of my parents wrote that she would never again snicker at a gay person. And I can tell that there are gay men and women in Santa Cruz who hold their heads higher as a result of my election.

I will always fight to end discrimination against gay men and women in our country. But my main concern as mayor is paving streets, developing an adequate supply of water, insuring social services for those in need and bringing harmony to city government after years of polarization.

My goal is to be the best damn mayor this city has ever had. If that makes it easier by example for other gay men and women to make their maximum contribution to their community, then it will have all been worth it. •

John Laird first came to Santa Cruz as a student at UCSC in 1968.