

## Harvey Milk and Me: "Do You Want to Help?"

*A special interview with Rick Cirillo, Founder of American Airlines' Rainbow TeAAM*

**W**ith the coming Pride season across America, this is a time we not only look ahead to our future but also recognize our history as a community and the remarkable progress we've made over the past decades.



As a special gift this month, we are especially honored to present a powerful one-on-one talk with our former colleague and the founder of our own Rainbow TeAAM – our friend Rick Cirillo.

Here in his own words and for the first time, Rick tells us how working for Harvey Milk changed him forever.

**Rick, thank you for taking the time to talk with us. You have accomplished so much in your career and especially here at American Airlines over the years. First, give us a glimpse what you are doing today and for giving us your personal recollections about your friend and boss Harvey Milk?**

Three and a half years ago I retired from American Airlines after almost 20 years. And today at 62 years old I live in Spokane, Washington as an openly gay father and grandfather with my husband of 12 years, Curtis Southworth.

I now work for People to People Ambassador Programs, as their Senior Director of the Air Department. We do an amazing job operating

student educational tours around the world. I could not be happier working for my openly gay boss, Ralph Beard, along with several of my co-workers in a very rewarding role.

I am out at work, in the community and my family. In September my grandson, Cameron, and I will be trekking off to Rome for his very first trip abroad with his gay grandpa! To be very honest, I don't know if I would be where I am today if it wasn't for Harvey Milk's influence.

**Tell us, when and how did you happen to meet Harvey Milk?**

It was in San Francisco, on a Saturday morning in late March or the beginning of April 1973 – nearly 40 years ago. I was living in the Castro, actually at 18<sup>th</sup> Street and Hartford.

I was just 25 years old and had arrived on the west coast about 6 months earlier, following a divorce, to take a job there, and decided to come out of the closet and to live my life honestly. You can only imagine my anxieties. The very day before I met Harvey I had been laid off from an airline job, and was pretty discouraged.

As I walked along Castro I noticed two men painting words on the window of a camera store. One of the men spoke to me as I passed and asked, "Do you want to help?"

I turned, and smiled at the man I thought was simply a leftover hippie from the Haight-Ashbury days, and kept walking. It sounded to me like a pick-up line a younger man might hear in the Castro.

"Come on, give us a hand," said Harvey. I turned around and introduced myself to Harvey Milk and his boyfriend, Scott Smith. That's exactly how it all began.



### **How did you happen to get a job at Harvey Milk's camera store?**

That very same day of our first meeting, Harvey offered me a job in his camera store. I told him my tale of woe and that I was looking for a job. "Can you paint," he asked. "Yeah, I can paint," I replied (despite the fact that I had never held a paint brush before in my life). He immediately hired me to paint the inside of his entire store, and once I finished, he told me that he'd find something else for me to do. Right away I liked him. He made me feel safe at a very tough time in my life – something Harvey has done for thousands of us.

### **Did you take part in Harvey's early political career, and help his campaigns in San Francisco?**

Harvey was a natural. He was the kind of person who could talk to anyone, anytime, anywhere!

I know he used to annoy the shop owners in Eureka Valley throughout the Castro neighborhood with his outbursts and his outspokenness as a gay activist. I had seen him thrown out of many establishments for those reasons. Harvey loved a stage and took every opportunity to be on stage talking about the oppression of gays and lesbians; he seemed as mesmerizing as a minister sometimes.

Most of us were not surprised when he decided to run for public office. He had strong convictions, people listened to what he had to say and Harvey loved to talk! He always attracted large crowds. All his friends, however, worried about his personal finances and the idea of his running for office with no money.

That is when I got involved by asking for donations on the street and on the phone. Building our grassroots was a lot of fun, and I learned so much from Harvey's brilliance as an organizer. Before being elected a San Francisco Supervisor, Harvey ran 3 early unsuccessful city campaigns, but always came close to winning.

The turning point in Harvey's career occurred when the leader of the teamsters union came into the Camera Shop and asked Harvey's help in opposing Coors for its anti-labor practices. Harvey agreed if in return the Teamsters would support openly gay drivers. The political coalition it sparked helped change and expand the gay community's clout throughout the city.

### **Since you were taking your own first steps as an openly gay man, how did working for Harvey make you feel about yourself?**

In the 1970's and even in San Francisco, it was still pretty difficult to be an openly gay man. I have to admit I was sometimes very scared. Like others, I feared being beat up, or publicly attacked or humiliated on the street, as well as being arrested by the police for no cause, except for being a gay man. However, when Harvey Milk was around I felt safe or in the company of large numbers of gay men and women, it also was possible to feel safe.

Without question, through my association with Harvey I gained more self-confidence and learned how to stand up for everything I knew was truthful and right. From that time forward, I always felt an obligation to repay Harvey and in my own lifetime, to commit my efforts to help the gay community but I could never have predicted what turns that commitment would take.

Fifteen years after Harvey's assassination, however, the opportunity arose. While working in marketing and sales for American Airlines, I was encouraged to form the American's Rainbow TeAAm, which to my knowledge, was the first LGBT sales and marketing team for a Fortune 100 company. Over the years since, other airlines and major companies like IBM have followed our lead. Today, I am encouraged to know that American Airlines remains on the top of the HRC "Best Places to Work" list.

**Do you have any specific anecdotes or private glimpses about Harvey that you'd like to share with all of us?**

Where do I start? Harvey found the very 1<sup>st</sup> Castro Street Fair in 1976 attracting over 5,000 people. All business owners, gay and straight, believed it was among the most profitable single day they'd experienced in years.

Through Harvey, the self-proclaimed "Mayor of Castro Street," I met so many remarkable people too. I remember how often his friend Randy Shilts hung out at the shop, and is now most remembered for writing "The Band Played On" and famously profiled Harvey in his biography, "Mayor of Castro Street." In those early days, when Randy found being gay made it difficult to secure a job as a journalist, Harvey helped land him a job at the San Francisco

Chronicle. And long ago, just enjoying brunch at Diane Feinstein's home was always unforgettable, especially watching her and Harvey argue endlessly and still remain best of friends.

**Finally, what would you tell young gay people today about Harvey Milk and some of the early days of the civil rights struggle in America? How important were his contributions to the cause of equal rights?**

That's easy. Just last night while strolling in downtown Spokane, I passed two couples, including a man and a woman, as well as two men. Both couples were holding hands, yet no one seemed to give either of the couples a second look. I wanted to run up to the gay couple and say you have Harvey Milk to thank for you holding hands in public!

Younger generations of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people will face their own struggles before we reach meaningful equality in our lives, but I hope they will read and learn not only about the outstanding contributions of Harvey Milk, but each of the gay men and women who have made small and major contributions to our rights along the way. We still have so much work to do, but let's learn from Harvey's example of leadership and make a personal decision how we can make a contribution in achieving our civil rights.