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GUEST OPINION: The Day I Was Told I Don't Belong in Society

By Ken Yeager



Ken Yeager marches in a Pride parade. Photo: Courtesy Ken Yeager

It was in early 1984 when I picked up the Sunday San Jose Mercury News and read an opinion piece by a local state Assembly member stating that homosexuals should have no legal, social, or political standing in society.

It was a remarkable statement. The Assemblyman, Alister McAlister, was urging then-Governor George Deukmejian (R) to veto Assembly Bill 1, the law passed by the Legislature that would make it illegal to discriminate based on sexual orientation. If such laws were passed, he argued, LGBTQ people would become a legitimate class deserving of legal protection. (Deukmejian did, in fact, veto the bill.)

I was a 31-year-old gay man, out to my friends but not to others. I was well aware of the hatred and persecution that gay people faced but this was the first time I had seen someone phrase it so bluntly: You are undeserving of the benefits provided by society.

I had come to San Jose when I was 18 to start a new life away from the conservative hometown where I grew up, where I knew I couldn't be gay. I graduated from San Jose State University with a degree in political science and held numerous jobs working on public policies to improve my adopted city.

Outraged by the time I finished reading McAlister's op-ed, I felt my contributions, along with those of my LGBTQ friends, were not just devalued but unwanted.

Putting the paper down, I said to myself: "Ken, if you don't fight for your rights to be a part of this community then no one else will." I came out publicly a week later in a Mercury News opinion piece denouncing McAlister and arguing for acceptance of gays and lesbians (the term that was used then) as full participants in society.

Coming out allowed me to co-found a South Bay political organization BAYMEC — the Bay Area Municipal Elections Committee — which still is in existence today. The skills I learned and the people I met through that political work allowed me to run for office in 1992 and become the first openly gay elected official in Santa Clara County.

Much has changed since 1984 but much still hasn't. For starters, we have a vice president who feels the same way about LGBTQ people as McAlister. He'd allow discrimination against gay people based on religious convictions in a second.