*Jay Wong on Harvey Milk*

*Harvey Milk was a visionary civil and human rights leader who became the first openly gay elected official in the United States.  Milk’s unprecedented loud and unapologetic proclamation of his authenticity as an openly gay candidate for public office, and his subsequent election gave never before experienced hope to LGBT people everywhere at a time when the community was encountering widespread hostility and discrimination.  By successfully integrating his life’s work into all four domains of his life - work, community, family, and home, he paved the way toward LGBT equality and represents a leader that I both admire and am personally indebted to.*

*Harvey Milk was not always the activist leader that we remember him to be.  After being born in 1930 and growing up in a middle class family of immigrants in New York, Milk attended the New York State College for Teachers.  He then joined the military, serving as Chief Petty Officer on a submarine rescue ship during the Korean War (1950–53).   After leaving the military, he tried  careers in teaching and finance, keeping a relatively low profile.*

*Even though he had known he was gay since high school and had relationships with other men, he did not involve himself in the political sphere until he moved to San Francisco in 1972.  It was there that he opened a small camera shop, Castro Camera, which quickly became a neighborhood center and catapulted him to leader of the gay rights movement.  In 1973, he decided to run for San Francisco supervisor.  However, given his lack of experience in the political sphere, he placed 10th in the election.  After trying two more times, he finally won a seat in 1977, becoming the nation’s first openly gay elected official.*

*Once in office, Milk was quick to act.  He helped pass a gay-rights law that prohibited discrimination in housing and employment based on sexual orientation. He also started programs that benefited minorities, workers, and the elderly. Milk then gained national attention for his role in defeating a state senate proposal that would have prohibited gays and lesbians from teaching in public schools in California.*

*Unfortunately, his career as a politics was short lived.  In 1978, Milk and Mayor Moscone were shot to death in City Hall by Dan White, a former city supervisor who had quit the board to protest the passage of the city's gay rights law.*

***Embracing Four-Way Wins***

*Milk’s decision to embark on a career in politics represents his ultimate four-way win, and serves as the primary reason why we still remember him today.   His decision to switch careers allowed him to integrate his work domain with every other part of his life.*

*Until he decided to switch into politics, Milk’s personal life was kept largely separate from his other domains.  Even his own family did not know that he was gay, and outside of his relationships with men his family life had little connection with his work and community.  By realigning his life to focus on LGBT issues, Milk was able to integrate his family domain into his work.  He sought to ensure that he was able to live the life he wanted to live without discrimination or other laws preventing him from doing so.  In doing so, his home domain had suddenly emerged as the focal point of his career.*

*With regard to the community domain, Milk’s activism became a catalyst that significantly advanced the rights of the LGBT community.  During the time he lived, significant obstacles stood in the way of LGBT equality.  Milk helped stop laws that would have prevented LGBT individuals from having certain professions from becoming enacted.  He also pushed for laws that made discriminating against an individual from receiving housing just because they were LGBT illegal.  More importantly, his actions energized and unified a community that had previously had very little voice.*

*Finally, for his self domain, becoming a political activist helped him align his values to what he was doing for his career. Milk understood what issues he was truly passionate about and fought to ensure he was heard. Despite a tragically short career in politics, his actions to this day have had a profound effect on the lives of LGBT individuals across the country.*

***Lessons Learned***

*It is unfortunate and frustrating that his political career was severely shortened by hostile adversaries.  However, what I learned from this situation was that it is never too late to integrate one’s own core values into all domains of one’s life.  Once he decided to merge his family and community domains into his work domain, his actions changed the course of San Francisco history.  His lasting impact is particularly impressive given his short tenure in public office.  I found it extremely inspiring to know that all of the legislation he was able to enact happened between his inauguration in 1977 and his death in 1978.  In other words, he created lasting history in half the time it has taken me to graduate from Wharton.*

*Another lesson that I learned is to have the courage to stand up for one’s core values, even in the face of adversaries.  He stood up for what he believed in his family and self domains and fought hard for what he felt was right.   Not only did he have the courage to stand up for himself, but his actions inspired others to do the same.  We would not be where we are in LGBT advocacy today had it not been for the advocacy that he fought for.*

*I would like to close by celebrating the fact that we are at a historic time in US history – a time where LGBT individuals are on the brink of receiving one of the final pieces of civil rights not yet institutionalized – the right to marry.  I cannot even fathom what it must have been like for Milk to encounter so much discrimination in every domain of his life.  All four domains - work, community, family, and self, were being impacted by institutional discrimination that was facing Milk during the period he lived.  His work in public office truly inspires me to embrace my own core values and integrate the various domains of my life into harmony with each other.*