



## Arizona LGBTQIA+ Archives

### Vice President Kamala Harris Archives®



Vice President Kamala Harris has deep roots in the LGBTQIA+ community. Those direct ties go back to the early 1970's Gay Freedom era, and to San Francisco County Supervisor Harvey Milk, the first Out Openly Gay Man elected to office in the United States to later be assassinated by one of his own fellow county supervisors inside the county office.

Those rainbow roots are an important part of Harris' identity. They affect how Harris considers issues she deals with as Vice-President that include all the ever growing demands to recognize LGBTQIA+ rights in the United States and countries around the world.

The story of Kamala Harris starts with her mother Shymala Gopalan. Shymala was born in 1938 in Tamil Nadu, India before she traveled to California on a student visa and scholarship in 1958 to study at the University of California in Berkeley. In Berkeley, near San Francisco and Oakland; Shymala Gopalan found herself right in the middle of the Hippie, Anti-Establishment, Rock & Roll, Free Love, Anti-Viet Nam War, Race Riots, Student Protests, University bombings, and many other cultural upheavals of the United States in the 1960s.

While in Berkeley California, Shymala Gopalan became close friends with Jim Rivaldo one of the historical giants in the 1960's 1970's LGBTQ+ San Francisco Bay Area community.

From that, Kamala Harris was able to talk to Jim Rivaldo for campaigning advice in her very first 2003 campaign race when she was elected as the District Attorney of San Francisco.

Harris took on a very entrenched incumbent and won by promising modernization to a City that is always looking for the next big popular thing. Helping Kamala win that race were the all those skills from Jim Rivaldo's last big campaign that he had worked on. Those campaign skills were with one of his very first clients, the Openly Gay Man Harvey Milk.

Rivaldo was the key behind-the-scenes strategist of Harvey Milk's 1977 election to the San Francisco Board Of Supervisors. That election success made Harvey Milk the first Out Gay Man to win a significant elected office in the United States. Jim Rivaldo can be seen in the back of numerous scenes in the Harvey Milk's Oscar-winning biopic *Milk*.

Jim Rivaldo designed all of Harvey Milk's campaign graphics, he worked through the polls and strategy data of exactly which voters had to be targeted in order to be elected, and helped create the press releases and political speeches for Harvey Milk and all of his political candidate clients telling the stories to the voting public on why they were running and needed to vote for them.

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When Harvey Milk was elected in 1977, the moment around San Francisco was an exciting euphoric moment, and a historic moment. Homophobia was very violent and very deadly there and all across the United States. Jim Rivaldo and his political campaign organizing crew were highly charged to strike such a historic blow to the Anti-Gay political establishment. That night there was dancing in the streets of San Francisco's main LGBTQ+ neighborhood known as the Castro District. Ironically, 43 years later the Castro District was dancing out in the streets again when Joe Biden and Kamala Harris and beat Donald Trump in the 2020 Presidential election.

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Tragedy struck not long after Harvey Milk's 1977 election to the post of San Francisco Board of Supervisors. In a pre-planned assassination plot San Francisco Board Supervisor Dan White assassinated Supervisor Harvey Milk and the Mayor of San Francisco George Moscone while also attempting to kill Supervisor Nancy Pelosi and others inside the San Francisco City Hall in 1978. Jim Rivaldo was the last person to ever speak to Harvey Milk.

Tragedy struck San Francisco and the United States yet again, and Jim Rivaldo was once again right in the center of it all.

Just thirty-one short months later after Harvey Milk was assassinated, the first report appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle* newspaper about a mysterious disease that would become known as AIDS.

Jim Rivaldo found more professional success in the 1990s, as the LGBT movement got stronger both in the United States and in the world. Jim Rivaldo took over Kamala Harris' campaign for attorney general in 2003 saying, she is one of us. She will ALWAYS stand with the Gay community, because she comes from it."

The Jim Rivaldo connection is not the only roots of Kamala Harris' to the LGBT community. Harris' voter base is the San Francisco political establishment that for decades was a major leader on LGBT issues in the United States. Harris allies like San Francisco Mayor Wille Brown and Congressional Representative Phil Burton who together helped pass a law that decriminalized same-sex relations.

Both Brown and Burton were masters at analyzing how and who voted for what. Both began going after the Gay Vote as early as the 1960 elections at a fundraiser in the home of a Gay couple.



Kamala Harris got a unique cultural education from her years immersed in the San Francisco bay area's historic LGBT+ communities. It's the kind of place you could watch drag superstar RuPaul perform in bright red dresses in the 1990s, and seeing Kamala Harris laughing in the audience along with her friends. While wearing a dark pantsuit and pearls.

Jim Rivaldo was always her Gay Uncle. When he began a long, painful decline due to liver disease it was Kamala's mother who jumped in helping Jim Rivaldo with his declining health. Jim Rivaldo passed away in 2007 and was followed by Kamala's mother two years later.

Kamala's devotion to the LGBT+ community was always visible. It was part of Harris's promise of modernization to the justice system where she kept LGBTQ+ issues at the center of her work when both District Attorney, Attorney General of California, and later as the Vice President.

Shortly after being elected District Attorney Kamala called a national conference of reform supporting prosecutors and public defenders to bring about the end of the phony "Gay/Trans Panic" Defense at court trials for attacks and murders of Gays. Kamala pushed aside the old constantly used defense attorney ploy that the murder of Gays or Transgender people is legally justified if someone panics and injures or kills them if they are nearby in their proximity.

After being elected California's Attorney General, Kamala Harris began working pushing the issue of marriage equality. By then, I was her press advisor. I recall sitting in a meeting as her host of lawyers debated legal theories to sway Supreme Court opinion. Kamala interrupted to lean in and asked: "What about the kids?"

She kept that focus throughout the process. Just how it impacted the millions of kids in homes with LGBT people. Kamala's work when a prosecutor was always focused on child victims. In cases with LGBT parents she saw kids victimized by conservative efforts that were crusading against them. Kamala knew and saw what was really occurring from her experiences knowing those kids. Kamala is the kind of person who knows *your* children, knows the kids of all her staff, her Lesbian, Transgender, and Gay neighbors and friends.

In submission of the legal brief to the United States Supreme Court that advocated specifically for the well-being of such children with LGBT parents. At the time United States Supreme Court Justices handed down their ruling on the right to same-sex marriage, it was Justice Anthony Kennedy who took care to address the matter in his legal opinion.

Kamala Harris' ties to the LGBTQ+ community are clearest on the matters of Transgender rights.

As the California Attorney General, Kamala Harris was called to legally defend the California Department of Corrections in a lawsuit over whether that state government department could be forced to provide full healthcare to the Transgender incarcerated prisoners.

Through Kamala Harris the State of California won that lawsuit, with the court finding that the prison system was not legally required to provide all care to Transgender prisoners.

However, Kamala Harris' actions as an LGBT supporter became very evident in what she did next. That was working hard to change that prison policy she had just been made to defend in her role as Attorney General because Kamala knew it was unfair and Anti-LGBT.

No national candidate ever had anything close to her ties to decades of LGBT history. That even though Kamala Harris is straight and married to Los Angeles lawyer Douglas Emmhoff.

Kamala's loyalty to the LGBT community has paid her back many times over. From her first political race, she began a solid base of voter's supporting her which always included LGBT voters along with the Black voters, South Asian voters, and Women voters. Harris built a very powerful and unique political coalition through her many efforts.

Harris has been in her car at Pride Parades in both Los Angeles and in San Francisco. Crowds along the routes cheer for Kamala as if she is Elton John or Lady Gaga. That is just who Kamala Harris is, and her view on the world stage as Vice President.

The campaign master and family friend Jim Rivaldo had it right. Kamala Harris grew up fighting for the LGBTQ community.



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