

NEWS

UPDATE: Long Beach Native, Longtime LGBT Rights Activist Jean Harris Passes

by Matthew Mendez | WalkabOUT | 06.27.11 | | Text Size: +

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8:43pm | Long Beach Lambda Democratic

Club leaders release statements on death of Jean Harris:

"On behalf of the Long Beach Lambda Democratic Club it is with great sadness that we mourn the loss of an amazing trail-blazer. Jean Harris, a former VP of Long Beach Lambda, never shied away from a fight for equality, even when it was not a popular choice.

Her dedication and passion for the LGBTQ community will forever be a staple and her legacy will live on through those she taught and mentored. Jean was a personal friend of mine and the woman that got me involved in politics. Our thoughts and prayers go out to her partner Denise and their children."

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Cory Allen
President
Long Beach Lambda Democratic Club

"Jean Harris was a tireless, fearless advocate for the Queer community for as long as anyone can remember. Starting in San Francisco, she occupied Harvey Milk's office right after he died. She was a force to be reckoned with long when powerful women were a rarity on the political scene. She moved among power brokers and made things happen at the State capitol through her intellect and sheer force of will.

When Jean came back to Long Beach, Lambda Democratic she immediately got more women on the board and energized local politics. The reason I ran for third district city council was that Jean Harris hunted me down and told me I had to run, against two top candidates, one of whom is still in office. The reason I made to the runoff was her political acumen and hard work. This is a great loss for the LGBTQ community."

A. Stephanie Loftin
Immediate Past President
Long Beach Lambda Democratic Club

3:35pm | Long Beach and the LGBT community statewide is mourning the passing of Jean Harris, a passionate and spirited political activist who helped blaze the trail for LGBT equality. She passed away last week at the age of 66 due to complications with several health issues, said her partner, Denise Penn.

Harris enjoyed a storied career in grassroots activism that placed her at the forefront of the California LGBT movement.

Progressive and outspoken at a time when "gay" was still a dirty word, Harris was committed to bringing the LGBT community out of the shadows and into the mainstream. Her time as executive director for California Alliance for Pride and Equality, the precursor to Equality California, would turn that organization into a formidable lobbying force with significant clout.

She was raised and educated in Long Beach, earning a bachelor's degree from Cal State Long Beach.

Harris did her post-graduate work at Cal State San Francisco and also left quite an imprint on that city. While there, she worked tirelessly during the early '90s to elect LGBT officials, such as Carol Midgin, Tom Ammiano, Harry Britt, and Roberta Achtenberg.

Even with all of her success up north and across the state, Harris never forgot about her home city. She served as the vice president of the Long Beach Lambda Democratic Club from 2008 to 2010, and worked on the campaign of city council candidate Stephanie Loftin in 2005.

Harris is survived by her children, Jann and Jill; her partner, Penn; Penn's children, Jake and Rachel; a granddaughter, Brooke; her siblings, Roy, George and Linda; and her mother, Mary, who recently celebrated her 90th birthday.

A private service will be held for family and friends. A celebration of life open to the public is being planned and will be announced at a later date.

Her memory will live on among the countless LGBT activists she mentored, campaigned with and befriended



Editor's note: Denise Penn is a Long Beach Post contributor.

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10 Comments so far.

ejannharris

My mother gave the best parts of herself to the LGBT community. We are grateful for everything written here. Thank you so much for recognizing her so sweetly.

Jean is survived by her two daughters, Jann and Jill, her granddaughter, Brooke, her partner Denise Penn and Denise's two children, Jake and Rachel. Despite the fact that WE were not a family unit, Jean cared deeply for Denise, and my sister and I respect how important she was to our mother.

Linda Welty

Jean Harris was my sister and will be missed by her family. Her surviving brothers are ROY and GEORGE Welty, her mother is Mary Welty.

Gerrie Schipske

I met Kathy Jean in 1977 when I first worked for the City of Long Beach. She worked on the CETA program in the Fire Department because the City was under a court order to get more women into the fire department. Jean was open and proud and stood up when some of us couldn't. She would stop by my office on the 13th Floor and the City Manager (my boss) would remind me afterwards that once gays got into City Hall they would want to bring their friends so I needed to be careful. Do tell! Jean was courageous, outspoken, in your face and will be in our hearts.

Bill Orton

Thank you for a magnificent tribute to Ms. Harris. The act of remembering is the first honor owed to great individuals, and certainly Jean Harris stands as great in any context.

Kate K

@Denise Penn: Our hearts and thoughts are with you.

John D. Wilson

I first met Jean Harris and her family in 1972 while we were working for George McGovern. It was the beginning of a friendship that has lasted for 40 years. Her children and ours grew up together and weathered the ups and downs of a particularly stormy and turbulent era. Jean was a passionate and committed activist for her core beliefs, sometimes to the exclusion of her personal life. However she remained a friend and mentor to those of us who knew from the beginning. She will be missed by all those that she held dear as family.

Mitch Buszek

I met Jean during the George McGovern campaign. She was an inspiring political activist, a terrific organizer and a strong and supportive friend. Thank you for being with us Jean.

Jill Harris

Jean Harris was my mother. My heart goes out to those that are grieving for her. I have yet to meet anyone quite like her.

R.I.P. Mommy.

John B. Greet

God bless and God speed, Jean Harris. And sincerest condolences to Denise Penn.

Matthew Mendez

Thank you Jann and Linda Welty for your corrections. I apologize for the errors; they have been fixed.

On a personal note, I want to express my deepest condolences to your family.



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