

Over 200 Turn Out for Memorial to Gloria Johnson

by Mark Gabrish Conlan, Member and Publisher, Zenger's Newsmagazine

"In this tradition, we emphasize *this* life," said Reverend Kathleen Owens, associate minister of the First Unitarian-Universalist Church in Hillcrest, at the start of the memorial service for veteran political activist Gloria Johnson on November 7th. "Gloria was a U-U member who lived her faith most actively in politics, who gave her time to make San Diego a place for equality."

Just how hard Johnson worked to make San Diego a place for both women's and LGBT equality —and how successful she was — was shown by the stellar list of attendees at her memorial. Among them were six current or former elected officials, including all three openly LGBT Democrats who have ever served on the San Diego City Council — Christine Kehoe, Toni Atkins and current acting mayor Todd Gloria. Other elected officials present included Congressmember Susan Davis, former City Councilmember Donna Frye, and current Councilmember and Mayoral candidate David Alvarez.

In addition, the program featured Dr. Delores Jacobs, chief executive officer of the San Diego Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center; Doug Case, current president of the San Diego Democrats for Equality — formerly the San Diego Democratic Club, of which Johnson was its first female president in 1980 and remained active in for the rest of her life; Benita Berkson, who previously served with Johnson as the president of the San Diego chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW); and singer-songwriter Chris Hassett (also a former San Diego Democratic Club activist), who sang his song "A Woman Is My Friend" with newly-written special lyrics for Johnson and led the audience in a sing-along of Holly Near's song "Singing for Our Lives" (written in 1978 as a memorial tribute to Harvey Milk) at the end.

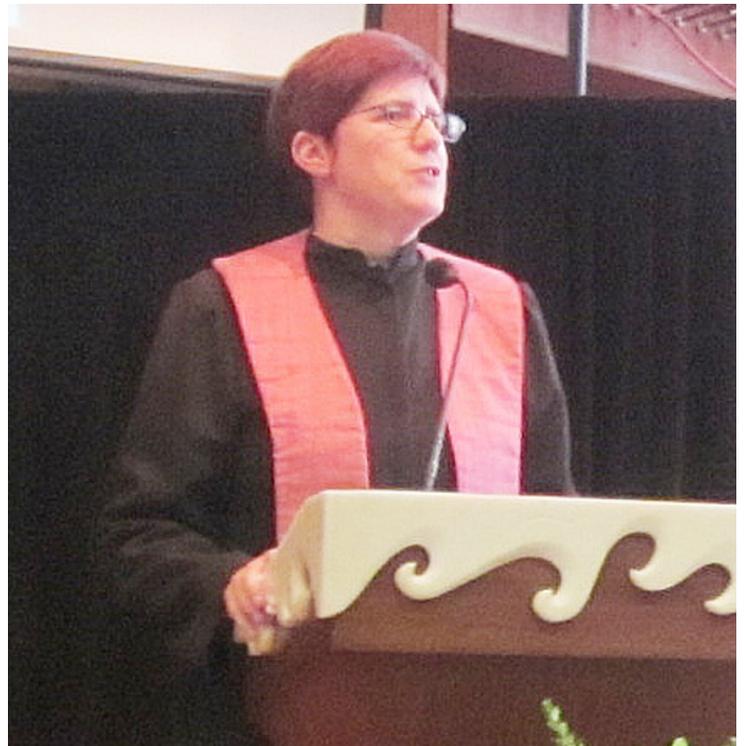
Referring to Johnson's famous diminutive size, Doug Case called her "the proverbial mouse that roared." He rattled off a list of adjectives to describe her: feminist, Democrat, liberal, Lesbian, caring, dedicated, diligent, meticulous, loyal, tenacious, assertive, outspoken, candid, joyful and, above all, stubborn. The room was full of knowing chuckles at that one. "One word nobody used to describe her was 'bipartisan,'" Case joked. "Today's room has the appearance of a Democratic campaign event."

"I met Gloria Johnson in 1992 at — what else — a Democratic campaign office," recalled Interim Mayor Todd Gloria. "That started a long love affair that lasted until her death." He noted that the similarity of their



REMEMBERING GLORIA JOHNSON: Above, Gloria Johnson (1937-2013) at last year's Freedom Awards. Below, the Unitarian-Universalist Church's Rev. Kathleen Owens begins Johnson's memorial service.

Photo Credits: Mark Gabrish Conlan



names had led her to joke that if they ever got married — not that that would ever happen, since he was about half her age and both were gay — she'd be "Gloria Gloria." Todd Gloria remembered Johnson's "loyalty to whatever candidate she would support," and

said that during her first campaign for City Council — in which the San Diego Democratic Club had endorsed his principal opponent, Stephen Whitburn — “she wore a T-shirt that said ‘Gloria for Gloria.’”

Todd Gloria recalled Johnson’s loyalty in other aspects than political campaigning. “After my mother, she was the most avid watcher of Channel 24” — the public-access cable channel that broadcasts the City Council’s meetings — “and after the meetings she’d send me an e-mail saying how she thought I did. The last time we spoke, she was in the rehab center, and she said, ‘The people here treat me well. The only bad thing is they don’t get Channel 24 in here.’”

“I’ve known her at least 30 years,” said Congressman Davis. “I’m trying to remember what election campaign it was when we met. We’ve already talked about Gloria being vertically challenged, but you always knew when she was in the room. ... She was a pillar of support for me. I was so proud of the work she did getting women and gay and lesbian people elected to office in San Diego. It’s hard to imagine that those things would have happened without her.”

“I have a hard time realizing that Gloria isn’t with us,” said Toni Atkins, former San Diego City Councilmember and current 78th District California State Assemblymember — both jobs to which Johnson helped elect her. “I didn’t imagine today. It didn’t occur to me.” Atkins said the news of Johnson’s death hit especially hard because it happened on September 22, 2013 — the same day the San Diego Democrats for Equality held their annual Freedom Awards reception, the club’s biggest and most prestigious fundraiser.

Like Todd Gloria, Atkins recalled that “you always knew when Gloria was in the room. Gloria would wear purple and every other color together with no sense of fashion. She was an iconic person 26 years ago. She was a community leader and a mentor by virtue of her example. She was a proud and vocal feminist and advocate for lesbian/gay equality. She was fiercely loyal. She’d be the first person to push the pro-choice question, she was proud to elect Christine Kehoe [the first openly LGBT person ever to hold elective office in San Diego], and she loved Donna Frye.”

Though Atkins eventually won office with Johnson’s help, the two women met before Atkins ever considered a political career. It was in the 1980s, when Atkins was a staff member for the embattled Womancare women’s health and family planning clinic in Hillcrest. The clinic was under assault every Saturday morning by anti-choice activists staging pickets and harassing patients. Atkins met Johnson when she agreed to help organize counter-demonstrations to step between the picketers and the patients and protect their right to choose.



REMEMBERING GLORIA JOHNSON: Above, club President Doug Case recalls 10+ adjectives that applied to Johnson. Below, Rep. Susan Davis eulogizes Johnson.

Photo Credits: Mark Gabrish Conlan



“Senator Kehoe and I made sure Gloria was honored by the state legislature two years ago,” Atkins recalled. “She came in in her familiar multicolored jacket, and was surrounded by eight lesbians in law enforcement in San Francisco. Kehoe leaned over to me and said, ‘Retirement might not be so bad.’ She changed our lives. She changed my life. The California Assembly did a beautiful memorial booklet. I celebrate her life, but I’m going to miss a friend.”

“Gloria dedicated her life to liberating women and LGBT people,” said Christine Kehoe. “Gloria lived her life with her heart and her beliefs on her sleeve. She believed all people deserved respect. No political campaign for Democrats in San Diego in the last 30 years or more failed to win her support, probably her active volunteer commitment, and usually financial support as well. I was one of the candidates who got her loyal support. But I knew Gloria before I ran for office. When I worked at the AIDS Assistance Fund in the late 1980s, Gloria was one of the few social workers who understood. She would navigate the social-service network to get people with AIDS at least some of the help and support they needed.”

Former Councilmember Donna Frye said she “looked for a sign that Gloria was up in heaven raising hell” — and found it in the fact that the day of her memorial, the US Senate passed the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), forbidding discrimination in employment on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. Frye said her first meeting with Johnson was when she sought help for a sexual harassment complaint against her own then-employer.

But, Frye said, her relationship with Johnson didn’t stay at that level. “It was not long before she had me volunteering for the Equal Rights Amendment,” Frye recalled. “Anyone who knows Gloria knows it’s impossible to tell her no. When I ran for office, Gloria was always there. She could work more volunteer hours and show up in more campaign photos than anyone else. This past January Gloria got an award from Mayor Bob Filner. Our last conversations brought us back to our first meeting, when we talked about sexual harassment and job discrimination issues.”

“Our community lost a great legend and a great teacher,” said Center director Jacobs, whose recollections of Johnson seemed to center around Johnson’s efforts to pin her down politically even though Jacobs was running a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation that isn’t allowed by law to endorse candidates. “She’d call me and ask, ‘You do support a woman’s right to choose, don’t you?’ and she’d ask me exactly how I stood on the Democratic political issue of the day,” Jacobs remembered. “I’d tell her that what I stood for wasn’t what a 501(c)(3) organization could stand for, but she’d say, ‘I know all that, but where is your heart?’ And if my answer wasn’t affirmative, I’d get another call the next day.”

“Gloria marched and rallied and volunteered for a better tomorrow,” said Rev. Owens at the close of the event. “On our last visit Gloria said, ‘I’m not ready to die. There’s so much left to do.’”

Then the church’s sound system played the Fleetwood Mac song “Don’t Stop (Thinking about Tomorrow),”



REMEMBERING GLORIA JOHNSON: Above, Iterim Mayor Todd Gloria, Assembly Majority Leader Toni Atkins and Dr. Delores Jacobs react to one of the memorial’s many amusing memories of Johnson. Below, San Diego’s first LGBT elected official, Chris Kehoe, remembers how Johnson was a pioneer in her own right. *Photo Credits: Mark Gabrish Conlan*



which Johnson had learned to love when both Bill and Hillary Clinton used it as the theme song of their Presidential campaigns. Offered as a song summarizing Johnson’s own life, it brought the audience at her memorial to their feet as they clapped along to its driving rhythm and savored its optimistic message:

*Don’t stop thinking about tomorrow
Don’t stop, it’ll soon be here
It’ll be here, better than before
Yesterday’s gone, yesterday’s gone ▼*