



Achtenberg, Roberta (b. 1950)

by Linda Rapp

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Roberta Achtenberg.

American activist and politician Roberta Achtenberg has been a strong advocate for civil rights, especially those of gays and lesbians. In 1993 she became the first openly gay person to be confirmed by the United States Senate for a major political post, Assistant Secretary of Housing and Urban Development.

Achtenberg's parents both immigrated to the United States, her father from the Soviet Union and her mother from Quebec. The Achtenbergs owned and ran a neighborhood grocery store in Los Angeles, where Roberta Achtenberg was born on July 20, 1950.

Education and Marriage

Although neither of Achtenberg's parents had attended high school, they valued education and resolved that their four children would go to college.

Achtenberg excelled at school and dreamed of being a lawyer. She began her college education at UCLA in order to be near her father, who was incapacitated by a stroke. After his death Achtenberg transferred to the University of California at Berkeley. While there, she met and married David Chavkin, a law student.

After graduating from Berkeley, Achtenberg began her own law studies at Hastings Law School in San Francisco. When her husband received a prestigious fellowship that took him to Salt Lake City, Utah, Achtenberg accompanied him and continued her studies at the law school of the University of Utah.

At the conclusion of his fellowship Chavkin returned to San Francisco, while Achtenberg remained in Utah to finish her law degree.

Divorce and the Beginnings of Social Activism

During the separation from her husband, Achtenberg found herself attracted to a woman. She began reading about homosexuality but did not discuss her feelings with anyone.

Achtenberg reunited with her husband after her graduation, but within two years the couple agreed to an amicable divorce. Thereafter, Achtenberg came out to her family but did not immediately reveal her sexual orientation publicly, fearing that it might be harmful to her career as a lawyer and educator.

At the same time, she was becoming increasingly aware of the disadvantage at which gays and lesbians were often placed under the law on a wide variety of issues, including housing, employment, adoption, and privacy rights.

Achtenberg joined the National Lawyers Guild in 1978 and began working on its Anti-Sexism Committee, which was creating a manual to help attorneys represent their gay and lesbian clients. The project eventually resulted in a wide-ranging treatise, *Sexual Orientation and the Law* (1985), which Achtenberg

edited.

Through her work with groups such as the Lesbian Rights Project and the Bay Area Lawyers for Individual Freedom, Achtenberg gained a reputation as an activist for gay rights.

Relationship with Mary Morgan

In 1979 Achtenberg met Mary Morgan, a prominent lesbian attorney known in particular for her expertise in representing lesbian mothers in custody cases. In 1981, Morgan was appointed by Governor Jerry Brown to a judgeship in the San Francisco Municipal Court.

The two lawyers became committed partners in 1982. Four years later Morgan gave birth to their son, Benjamin Alexander Morgan Achtenberg, whom Achtenberg legally adopted.

Political Career

Achtenberg made her first foray into electoral politics with a run for the California State Assembly in 1988. She lost to an experienced and better-known opponent, but the election was closer than expected.

The following year Achtenberg entered the race for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. Although five at-large seats were open, the press tried to portray Achtenberg and Carole Migden, another lesbian candidate, as opponents for the same slot, on the assumption that voters would not elect two lesbians to the Board. As it turned out, however, they did.

As a supervisor, Achtenberg worked to better the lives of all her constituents, taking on such varied issues as tenants' rights, wheelchair access, the right of small businesses to compete for city contracts, and the provision of shelters for victims of domestic violence.

National Attention

Her role as a lesbian elected official brought her national attention. She received letters from gays and lesbians around the country and also from parents of gay children who found hope in her success. "The ability to be in public life has been enormously positive to our movement, to our people," said Achtenberg, "and being able to contribute has been very gratifying."

Another result of her national visibility was that contenders for the 1992 Democratic presidential nomination sought her endorsement early on. After Virginia Apuzzo, a lesbian activist and a member of the administration of New York Governor Mario Cuomo, approached Achtenberg and described Cuomo's pro-gay record, Achtenberg agreed to support him. Soon, however, she heard from members of the campaign of then little-known Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton. Achtenberg was impressed by Clinton, but having pledged to support Cuomo, explained that she could only endorse Clinton if Cuomo withdrew from the race.

Once Cuomo decided not to run, Achtenberg launched herself enthusiastically into the Clinton campaign, helping to organize fund-raisers and other events.

Achtenberg was a member of the committee drafting the Democratic Party's platform, and she addressed the national convention in defense of the document. In introducing herself to the delegates, she proudly identified herself as a lesbian, a mother, and a Jew.

Nomination to HUD and the Confirmation Fight

As President-elect Clinton assembled his cabinet, he invited Achtenberg to be Assistant Secretary of Housing and Urban Development for Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity. Achtenberg would be the first openly gay

person to receive Senate confirmation for an administration post.

The process was long and grueling. Conservative Christian groups lobbied against her, and a number of conservative Senators attempted to block her appointment.

Senator Jesse Helms spearheaded the opposition, making numerous public comments against Achtenberg, whom he described as a "damn lesbian," an "intolerant radical," and a "mean person" who "tried to bully the Boy Scouts." Immediately before the vote on confirmation Helms warned Achtenberg's supporters that "if any member of this Senate thinks this vote will go unnoticed by their constituents back home, they may find out otherwise" when they ran for reelection.

Achtenberg and the Boy Scouts of America

The Senate debate included many allusions to what opponents called Achtenberg's "vendetta" against the Boy Scouts, prompting *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter April Lynch to write, "The Boy Scouts issue was brought up so often that some tourists sitting in the Senate visitors gallery became confused as to whether they were hearing debate on the Scouts or a HUD nomination."

Achtenberg had been one of over fifty members of the board of directors of the United Way in San Francisco who voted unanimously not to give funds to the Boy Scouts because of their discriminatory policy against gay and bisexual boys.

The Christian Action Network sent all Senators a tape of Achtenberg and Morgan riding in the 1992 Gay Pride Parade in San Francisco. The clip included a brief embrace by the couple. Helms referred to this as evidence of Achtenberg's "insane assault on family values" and castigated her for "demanding that society accept as normal a lifestyle that most of the world's major religions consider immoral and which the average American voter instinctively finds repulsive."

The much-admired Senator Claiborne Pell was among those to speak in support of Achtenberg's confirmation, urging colleagues to use "simple standards of fairness and equal treatment" when considering the nominee. In the course of his remarks he also mentioned that his daughter, Julia Pell, was a lesbian and that he would not want her "barred from a government job because of her orientation."

Confirmation

After Achtenberg's testimony before the Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee and the vigorous efforts of her proponents, especially Senators Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer of California and Donald Riegle of Michigan, the full Senate confirmed her nomination by a vote of 58 to 31.

To keep the family together, Morgan resigned her judgeship in California and moved to Washington, D.C. with Achtenberg and their son.

Achievements at HUD

As Assistant Secretary at HUD, Achtenberg worked on such issues as fairness in mortgage lending and home insurance, and on finding housing for thousands of low-income citizens displaced by the 1994 earthquake in California.

Among her proudest achievements was the integration of previously all-white Vidor, Texas. With HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros, Achtenberg developed a public housing project for the city and worked with community leaders to ensure successful and peaceful integration despite the opposition of the Ku Klux Klan. When construction was complete, Achtenberg went to Vidor and helped the new tenants move in.

Return to California

Achtenberg left HUD in 1995 to run in the primary for mayor of San Francisco. Given little chance at the outset, she gained considerable support but eventually lost by a narrow margin.

She briefly went back to Washington to serve as a Senior Advisor to Cisneros, but in 1996 she and her family returned to California. Achtenberg accepted a position with the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, where she was Senior Vice President for Public Policy until 2005.

In 2000, Achtenberg was appointed to the Board of Trustees of California State University by Governor Gray Davis. She became chair of the Board in May 2006.

She also serves as a director of the Bank of San Francisco and the San Francisco-based software company, Andrew J. Wong, Inc.

On January 26, 2011, President Obama named Achtenberg to the United States Commission on Civil Rights.

Honors

For her commitment to gay and lesbian rights, Achtenberg has received a GLAAD Visibility Award and a Founders Award from the National Center for Lesbian Rights, among other honors.

She was also named one of the "50 Most Influential Businesswomen in the Bay Area" in 1997.

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