

# The HARVEY MILK PAPERS

## Susan Davis Alch Collection

1956-1962

Collection Number: GLC 19

### HISTORICAL NOTE

After completing his stint in the Navy, Harvey Milk spent the fall and winter of 1955 in Los Angeles. Mike Sather, a mutual friend, introduced Milk to Susan Davis during that time. It is also during this period that Milk met and fell in love with John Harvey, a friend of Sue's. In spring 1956, Milk moved to Miami with John Harvey and Don [Donna?]. Once there, Milk and Harvey parted company. In a few letters, Milk notes that he had a "blind" love for Harvey which was not returned. Although Milk intended to settle in Miami, he returned to New York in May because of family problems.

In spite of his desire to spend the summer in New York and then return to Miami, Milk remained in NYC after meeting Joe Campbell in June or July 1956. In September? 1957, they moved to Dallas and his letters describe how unhappy they were there. They moved back to NY in February 1958, after taking a trip through New Orleans for Mardi Gras. Shortly after their return, Campbell's mother died in March or April 1958. In December, Milk describes Campbell's job as a page and handyman at Xavier Cugat's Club, Casa Cugat.

During September 1957-May 1958, Sue Davis attended the University of Illinois at Champaign. She then worked for Abbott Universal Ltd. in Chicago from June to November, and began her television career with Louis C. Fox in December 1958. Davis spent Labor Day weekend [1958?] in Miami where she saw John Harvey, Donna and Art.

By March 1960, Davis had moved to Beverly Hills, California where she worked for Eglash, Lincoln & Litwin. In June, Milk asked her to send mail to his father's address since "all mail gets opened in the mail room downstairs"; he was working at the Great American Insurance Company at this time. In a letter postmarked June [2 or 21], Milk says that Davis and Harvey's surprise phone call "made my mind & heart go back four years to a little home in L.A. & a 'god' whom I was very much in love with."

By July 1960, Milk and Campbell were beginning to grow apart. Apparently in response to Davis' question of whether or not Milk would consider a relationship with John Harvey, Milk replied that he was not ready to give up on Joe, and that he might not still have the same feelings for John. In this letter Milk also noted that New York's gay bars were having a rough time, that many had closed, but that New York's gays were still finding places to meet. He also asks about Davis' intention to finish her education in Los Angeles.

In his letter of August 1, 1960, Milk notes the recent death of Sue's father and mentions the death of Joe's mother in 1958. Of death he writes that since his mother "has been on borrowed time for 2 ½ years, we [the Milk family] realize it can come any day—but...we walk happy and full of life for the present."

Davis worked for the film industry until early 1961. That February, Milk wrote that he made a snowman for Campbell, who was then in the "plants" business (that is, importing plants from Florida). Milk also described the creation of attractions for the 1964 World's Fair in New York.

Upon learning of Davis' marriage to George Alch in June? 1961, Milk once again gave marriage advice. Ironically, he and Campbell broke up in July 1961 after five years of "marriage." Milk then considered moving to Miami, and "even thought of marrying one the 'strange girls' I know—we would have compainship [sic], a front & each would not be in the way of the other" (September 14, 1961). By April 1962, Joe Campbell had moved into his own apartment.

## SCOPE AND CONTENT

The collection contains correspondence, and a few photographs which Milk sent to Susan Davis Alch during the years 1956-1962. Milk's warmth and affection for Davis are evident in all of the letters. He looks back fondly on the time he spent with Davis and their group of friends which included John Harvey. These letters were unknown to Randy Shilts, Milk's biographer. Neither Susan Alch nor John Harvey is mentioned in *The Mayor of Castro Street: the life and times of Harvey Milk* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982).

The collection contains two series:

**Series I**      **Correspondence: 1956-1962** (30 items)

**Series II**     **Photographs: [1950s, 1961?]** (4 items)

The Susan Davis Alch Collection complements the Harvey Milk Archives—Scott Smith Collection and the Joe Campbell Collection both of which are at the James C. Hormel Gay and Lesbian Center of the San Francisco Public Library. See the *Guide to the Archival Collections* for more information on these collections.

## SERIES DESCRIPTIONS

**Series I—Correspondence between Milk and Susan Davis Alch: 1956-1962** (30 items) contains letters, postcards and a telegram from Harvey Milk to Susan Davis Alch. This series is arranged chronologically. There are two postcards from Miami (March-April 1956), two letters from Dallas (January 1958), and one postcard and twenty-five letters from New York (May 1956, April 1958-1962).

Many of Milk's letters refer to their mutual friends, especially John Harvey, Milk's relationship with Joe Campbell, the positive and negative aspects of New York City, the possibilities of moving to Florida, Milk's search for better employment, his and Joe's move to Dallas, potential visits from Sue, movies, his cultural activities, gay life in New York and Montreal, and the deaths of Davis' father and Joe Campbell's mother. His letters also contain numerous jokes.

**Series II—Photographs: [1950s, 1961?]** (4 items) contains four snapshots: two of John Harvey, perhaps Milk's first love; one of Joe Mahaffey and Del Erickson; and one of Harvey Milk on the beach. The Milk photograph was originally enclosed with his June 21, 1961 letter to Susan and George Alch.

## CONSERVATION NOTE

During processing, the collection was re-folded and re-housed in acid-free folders and boxes. Metal fasteners were removed and brittle items were photocopied onto Permalife bond paper.

## PROVENANCE NOTE

The Harvey Milk Papers—Susan Davis Alch Collection was donated by the Library Foundation of San Francisco on February 19, 1997 (Accession # 1997-2).

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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Timothy T. Wilson, Processing Archivist  
San Francisco, CA. February, 1997.

#### Series I -- Correspondence between Harvey Milk and Susan Davis Alch

(<sup>pm</sup> indicates a date taken from the postmark on the envelope or postcard, [] indicates a date inferred from the postmark and the letter itself, and ? indicates an approximate or unconfirmed date).

1. <sup>pm</sup> 1956 March 19 Harvey [Milk], Miami Beach, FL to Sue Davis, Beverly Hills, CA.  
Postcard re: arrival in Miami.
2. <sup>pm</sup> 1956 April 11? Harvey [Milk], Miami Beach, FL to Sue Davis, Beverly Hills, CA.  
Postcard re: Miami.
3. <sup>pm</sup> 1956 May 5 Harvey [Milk], New York, NY to Sue Davis, Beverly Hills, CA.  
Postcard re: return to NY.
4. <sup>pm</sup> 1958 January [15] Harvey [Milk], Dallas, TX to Sue Davis, Champaign, IL.  
Re: mentions Joe [Campbell].
5. <sup>pm</sup> 1958 January [21] Harvey [Milk], Dallas, TX to Sue Davis, Champaign, IL.  
Re: moving back to NY or to Florida, and John [Harvey]. Excerpt: “even though the love I had for John was not returned.”
6. 1958 April 10 [<sup>pm</sup> 11] Harvey [Milk], New York, NY to Sue Davis, Champaign, IL.  
Re: death of Joe’s mother, recession/depression nun joke, the stage, and NY.
7. <sup>pm</sup> 1958 June 6 Harvey Milk, New York, NY to Sue Davis, Chicago, IL.  
Re: John Harvey, Sue’s beauty, trips, Carnegie Hall joke
8. <sup>pm</sup> 1958 August 27 Harvey Milk, New York, NY to Susan Davis, Chicago, IL.  
Re: New York, asks Sue to visit.
9. 1958 August 27 Harvey [Milk], New York, NY to Susan Davis, Abbott Laboratories, Room 1000, [Chicago, IL].  
Re: telegram with birthday and Christmas greetings.
10. <sup>pm</sup> 1958 September 22 Harvey [Milk], New York, NY to Susan Davis, Chicago, IL.  
Re: thank you note, and Sue’s visit on Thanksgiving or Christmas.
11. [1958? September?] Tuesday, Harvey [Milk], New York, NY to Susan Davis, Chicago, IL.

Re: trip with Joe to Montreal, and marriage advice.

12. [1958? September?] [Susan Davis] to Harv[ey Milk] typed letter with marginalia in pencil by Harvey as his reply  
Re: Sue's trip to Florida and her visit with John Harvey, Donna, and Art.
13. [1958] October 10 [Harvey Milk], Long Beach, NY to Susan Davis, Chicago, IL  
Re: friendly letter, possibly moving to Manhattan.
14. <sup>pm</sup> 1958 October 24 [Harvey Milk], New York, NY to Susan Davis, Chicago, IL.  
Re: Sue's aunt's move from New York to Chicago, rebus message about *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and seeing the big country.
15. <sup>pm</sup> 1958 October 29 [Harvey Milk], New York, NY to Sue Davis, Chicago, IL  
Re: Halloween note.
16. <sup>pm</sup> 1958 December 9 Harvey Milk, Long Beach, NY to Susan Davis, Chicago, IL.  
Re: skiing, John [Harvey] and Donna, Sue's new television job, Joe's job at Xavier Cugat's club, Casa Cugat, possibly moving to NY.
17. <sup>pm</sup> 1960 March 24 [Harvey Milk], New York, NY to Susan Davis, Chicago, IL forwarded to Beverly Hills, CA.  
Re: friendly letter written in a spiral about spring
18. <sup>pm</sup> 1960 May 27 Harvey [Milk], New York, NY to Susan Davis, Beverly Hills, CA.  
Re: friendly letter, mentions "Miss Hunter" [i.e. Tab] becoming an antiques dealer, trip to Canada.
19. <sup>pm</sup> 1960 June 9 Harvey [Milk], New York, NY to Susan Davis, Beverly Hills, CA.  
Re: pictures of Joe [Campbell], and Sue's visit.
20. <sup>pm</sup> [1960?] June 21 H[arvey] B. Milk, New York, NY to Susan Davis, Westwood, CA.  
Re: John [Harvey]. Bottom of page three is torn off
21. <sup>pm</sup> 1960 July 11 Harvey [Milk], New York, NY to Susan Davis, Los Angeles, CA.  
Re: relationship with Joe [Campbell] and with John [Harvey], gay life in NY, Austin O'Toole and his productions, racehorse joke, and "Good Luck Prayer" chain letter.
22. 1960 August 1 Harvey[Milk], New York, NY to Susan Davis, Los Angeles, CA.  
Re: Joe [Campbell], education, Sue's father's death, Sue's visit.
23. 1960 September 1 Harvey Milk, New York, NY to Susan Davis, Los Angeles, CA.  
Re: life in NY and rents.
24. 1960 September 12 Harvey [Milk], New York, NY to Susan Davis, Los Angeles, CA.  
Re: Hurricane "Donna," Austin O'Toole and Phil Silvers' productions.
25. <sup>pm</sup> 1961 February [8] Harvey [Milk], New York, NY to Susan Davis, Los Angeles, CA.  
Re: Joe and New York.

26. 1961 June 5 Harvey [Milk], New York, NY to Sue [Davis].  
Re: friendly letter, mentions Joe [Campbell] and John [Harvey].
27. <sup>pm</sup> 1961 June 21 Harvey B. Milk, New York, NY to Mr. & Mrs. George Alch, Los Angeles, CA.  
Re: Sue's marriage, and San Francisco. For enclosed snapshot of Harvey on the beach, see Series II Photographs.
28. 1961 September 14 Harvey Milk, New York, NY to Mrs. George Alch, Los Angeles, CA.  
Re: breaking up with Joe [Campbell], John Harvey's whereabouts, marrying a "strange girl," and movies.
29. 1961 November 8 Harvey Milk, New York, NY to Mrs. George Alch, Los Angeles, CA.  
Re: Russian film "Summer to Remember," and Joe [Campbell]'s visit and the opera.
30. 1962 April 3 Harvey Milk, New York, NY to Mrs. George Alch, Los Angeles, CA.  
Re: John Harvey, break-up with Joe Campbell, movie reviews, possible trip to Greece. Excerpt; "...can you picture Jesus with teased hair."

**Series II - Photographs (4 items)**

31. John Harvey (2 items), Joe Mahaffey and Del Erickson (1 item); all three photographs are from the 1950s and were originally filed after the December 9, 1958 letter.  
Harvey Milk (1 item); it was originally enclosed with letter dated June 21, 1961.