

HERZENBERG WINS SEAT

On November 3, 1987, 3,575 Chapel Hill voters elected this state's first openly gay politician. Joe Herzenberg, a 46-year-old historian and former catfish rancher, who lost three previous bids for a seat on the town council, finally won, receiving more votes than any other white male candidate in the town's history.

Many of Herzenberg's supporters were surprised to learn they had elected a phenomenon in sexual politics. At the end of two decades of what essayist Frank Rich calls the "homosexualization of America," a period during which homoerotic aesthetics, homosexual social themes and gay health issues have passed into popular culture and public consciousness, it is easy to forget that from sea to shining sea there are only 30 to 40 uncloseted gay electees at any level of government. Indeed, it is a grim joke among gay civil rights workers that the number of gay congressmen has recently doubled: there are now two. Harvey Milk, elected to San Francisco's Board of Supervisors and assassinated a year later, was the nation's first avowedly gay official--a mere nine years ago.

Even among this small fraternity of successful gay politicians, council member-elect Herzenberg is a rarity, perhaps unique. For while lesbian & gay candidates in Key West, San Francisco, Boston, St. Paul and West Hollywood have been elected by predominantly lesbian/gay constituencies from gay ghettos, Herzenberg won in an at-large election in a small and comparatively diverse Southern town.

Although gay supporters provided the driving energy of the campaign, and the politicization of lesbians & gay men gave Herzenberg the decisive edge, he could not have relied exclusively on the gay bloc in a campaign with no identifiable gay issues. It was a combination of his answers to town growth management questions, a strategy of door-to-door personal contact with a broad base of liberal voters, and galvanized gay power that got Herzenberg elected.

It was also a matter of timing. During Herzenberg's first two campaigns, many of the main political issues in Chapel Hill were budgetary rather than development arguments, and Herzenberg was perceived as a radical spend-thrift. His ideas haven't changed, he says, but the voters and the political emphasis have.

The timing was right for Herzenberg to capitalize on the

lesbian/gay vote as well. The success of the two-year-old Gay Pride March, the re-election in Durham of liberal mayor Wib Gulley, and the evolution of Raleigh's pro-gay city council have served to solidify the previously ephemeral gay political organization in the Triangle area. Perhaps most importantly, the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights had a tremendous impact on Herzenberg's campaign.

The town Sen. Jesse Helms once suggested be fenced in and advertised as the North Carolina state zoo, the first white Southern town to elect a black mayor, has earned for itself yet another important distinction as a liberal mecca. But beyond its historic and symbolic significance, what does Herzenberg's victory mean? What will it mean to have a gay member of the town council?

In lighter moments, Herzenberg has toyed with the idea of instituting "gay Friday," a weekly dose of mind expansion in which straight residents of Chapel Hill would be required to become gay for a day. He has also considered the fecund prospect of a gay men's baton twirling troupe for town parades. But in general he concedes that there is little specifically gay legislation to be acted on or created. For the most part, Herzenberg sees his election as a gay candidate in terms of social therapy.

"My emphasis on open government --campaign financial reporting, disclosure of property holdings, clean, open processes of government--that is sort of metaphorical, as far as I'm concerned, for being open about sexuality," says Herzenberg. "It's one thing that gay liberation has to offer to the society as a whole: being honest about things, not hiding things."

Besides the social and psychological value for lesbians & gay men themselves, Herzenberg believes that gay political activity has an invigorating effect on democracy. While it's clear that many mainstream Americans have become disillusioned about the possibilities of electoral politics, gays, like immigrants and other marginal groups, are becoming more and more excited about those possibilities. It may be that such excitement is infectious, and lavender patriots such as Joe Herzenberg will help revitalize traditional American political values. This has certainly been the case during the past few weeks in Chapel Hill.

- SEAN ROWE