



Jared Polis.

## Polis, Jared (b. 1975)

by Linda Rapp

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2009 glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Businessman and philanthropist Jared Polis served on the Colorado Board of Education before winning election to the United States House of Representatives in 2008. He became one of only three openly gay members in the current Congress, and the first openly gay man elected to Congress as a freshman.

Polis's parents, Stephen Schutz and Susan Polis Schutz, came of age in the 1960s and were active opponents of the war in Vietnam. Self-described "flower children," they made their living traveling around the country in a pick-up truck and selling original posters. Eventually they started a company, Blue Mountain Arts, to publish books of Susan Schutz's poetry with illustrations by her husband, who had originally trained as a physicist.

While the works may not have had great literary merit, several became best-sellers. With their new-found wealth, the Schutzes moved to an affluent suburb of San Diego, California from Boulder, Colorado, where their eldest son, then named Jared Polis Schutz, had been born on May 12, 1975.

(He changed his name to Jared Schutz Polis in 2000 in order, he told reporter Michael Roberts, "to honor my mother's maiden name, and because I liked it better," but he insisted on the importance of retaining both parental surnames. He went on to state that he used the occasion of modifying his name "to stage a fundraiser for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society that netted \$40,000 in contributions.")

Polis attended the private La Jolla Country Day School. He showed an early interest in politics, founding a Young Democrats Club while he was in high school and working as a campaign volunteer from the time that he was in his early teens.

Polis graduated at the age of sixteen and enrolled at Princeton University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in political science.

While Polis was pursuing his studies, he also embarked on a career in business. With two friends at Princeton, he founded an internet provider service called American Information Systems. A few years later, in 1998, they sold the company for more than twenty-two million dollars. Polis also entered into a business venture with his parents, establishing [Bluemountain.com](http://www.bluemountain.com), an offshoot of the publishing company that offered on-line greeting cards. The family sold the internet company in 1999 for some seven hundred million dollars.

Meanwhile, Polis had started yet another cyber-business, [ProFlowers.com](http://www.proflowers.com), which sold flowers directly to customers from growers. The enterprise grew into Provide Commerce, an umbrella company that included a business selling chocolates on-line and the Sonora Entertainment Group, the operator of a chain of Spanish-language movie theaters. Polis sold Provide Commerce in 2006 for over four hundred million dollars.

Polis is strongly committed to improving education, and so in 2000 he initiated the Jared Polis Foundation, which works to support at-risk youth and their teachers, to provide "options beyond traditional,

comprehensive high schools," and to expand the availability of computer technology to schools.

In 2004 Polis founded the New America School to serve immigrant youth in Colorado. The enterprise has since expanded to include four campuses in that state and has plans to open a campus in New Mexico to extend the benefits of English literacy and a high school liberal arts education to all students. In the fall of 2005 Polis co-founded the Academy of Urban Learning to address the challenges faced by teens who struggle with homelessness or unstable living conditions.

New America School Board President Richard Garcia stated that Polis "has a passion to give kids who normally don't get opportunities the chance to be successful in school. At the New America School, he's focusing on immigrants who are in the sixteen-to-twenty age group—kids who are on the verge of dropping out, have dropped out, or haven't even registered. Society often discards these youths, but he's reaching out to them. In that way, what he's doing is really visionary."

In 2000 Polis made his first run for elective office, standing for the Colorado Board of Education. He won by only some ninety votes out of approximately a million cast but went on to be named chairman of the board and to play a key role in the passage of Colorado Amendment 23 in 2004 to increase funding of public education. He also led the Board's Online Education Task Force to bring more applications of technology to the state's classrooms.

Near the end of his tenure on the Board of Education in 2006 Polis came out publicly as a gay man. His partner, Marlon Reis, a writer, was prominently at Polis's side at campaign events when he ran for the United States House of Representatives in the Second District of Colorado and also on election night when they celebrated Polis's victory.

The first openly gay congressional candidate from Colorado, Polis defeated two other candidates, including an establishment favorite who was backed by some gay activists, including fellow philanthropist Tim Gill, to win the Democratic nomination for the seat in an election that set a record for the number of votes cast. In the general election, he glided to an easy victory in one of the most liberal congressional districts in the country.

Running on a promise to help change the culture of Washington, Polis spent heavily—including over five million dollars of his own money in the Democratic primary—to overcome a relative lack of name recognition. While his opponents accused him of attempting to buy the seat, Polis likely won because he presented himself as a candidate with a fresh face and new ideas. Although he had the endorsement of the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, his sexual orientation was not a major issue in either the Democratic primary or the general election.

Since going to Washington, Reis has received a Congressional ID card designating him as a spouse although the couple has not been able to realize their wish to marry since marriage equality has yet to be achieved in Colorado.

Polis credits Wisconsin Representative Tammy Baldwin, who is out as a lesbian, for her work to secure spousal privileges for same-sex partners of members of Congress. He counts Baldwin and openly gay Representative Barney Frank of Massachusetts among his mentors on Capitol Hill.

At the invitation of Baldwin, Polis became co-chair of the LGBT Equality Caucus, on which Frank also serves. The new Representative thus promises to become an influential spokesperson for glbtq concerns nationally. Among his priorities are the passage of a hate crimes bill and an inclusive non-discrimination law, as well as repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell and the Defense of Marriage Act.

Because of his passionate interest in education, Polis was also appointed to several committees dealing with that issue, as well as others concerning the environment, energy, technology, and health.

Polis was recently appointed to the U. S. Air Force Academy's Board of Visitors. In announcing the appointment, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi said, "I am particularly pleased to appoint Jared Polis to the Board of Visitors given the strong ties between his congressional district and the academy near Colorado Springs and his expertise in the field of education coupled with his commitment to our national security." As an openly gay man on record in favor of repealing the ban on openly gay service members in the military, Polis is an unlikely member of the academy's Board, but he may be able to open some eyes.

An opponent of the war in Iraq, Polis made a trip to that country in April 2009. His concerns included not only the military situation but also the homophobia and horrendous anti-gay violence that has riven the country, issues that he discussed with the chairwoman of the Iraqi Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights, whom he cautiously described in an interview with Will O'Bryan of *Metro Weekly* as "generally receptive to the arguments."

Changing the attitude of an entire culture is a daunting task when glbtq people may find it hard to receive acceptance even in their own families. Polis's mother, Sarah Polis Schutz, inspired by her son's coming out, addressed the response of families to such announcements in her 2008 documentary film, *Anyone and Everyone*, so named because anyone and everyone could have a glbtq child.

The families appearing in her film are a reflection of American society. They come from various religious traditions, including Roman Catholic, Southern Baptist, Hinduism, Mormonism, and Judaism. The ethnic heritage of the subjects is likewise diverse, with people of Bolivian, Japanese, and Cherokee ancestry, among others.

Schutz recalled that she and her husband were "totally shocked" when their son came out to them shortly after his graduation from college but that it made no difference in their love for him. A longtime supporter of civil rights, Schutz, after this intensely personal experience, took an increased interest in glbtq rights and the dynamics of families that include glbtq children.

"I . . . wanted to tell the stories of the conflict, fear, and anguish felt by the families and their gay children when their gay children came out to them. Often even the most supportive parents had mental barriers to get through before fully accepting their gay child on a personal level," she stated.

Her film shows the pressures that religious, ethnic, or other social communities may impose on glbtq youth and their parents, but it also offers the families hope of finding a strong, supportive community. Schutz attended meetings of PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) across the country and included footage of them in the documentary.

While recognizing the continuing societal prejudice in America and "antiquated laws and unequal rights that inhumanely and negatively affect gay people all over the world," Schutz expressed her optimism for positive change, saying, "I hope that *Anyone and Everyone* will accomplish its mission and help make it easier for all gay people and their families to live a perfectly normal life that is respected by everyone."

On September 30, 2011, Polis and Reis announced the birth of their son, Caspian Julius.

## **Bibliography**

"Anyone and Everyone: A Documentary Film by Susan Polis Schutz": <http://www.anyoneandeveryone.com/biography.html#story>.

Cahill, Pat. "Gay Child Inspires Movie." *The Republican* (Springfield, Massachusetts) (February 29, 2008): E1.

Frank, Robert. *Richistan: A Journey through the American Wealth Boom and the Lives of the New Rich*. New York: Crown, 2007.

Heil, Emily. "So What If He's Gay?; Jared Polis Avoids Drama." *Roll Call* (December 15, 2008): Around the Hill, K.

Jared Polis Foundation: <http://www.jaredpolis.com>.

Johnson, Chris. "Mr. Polis Goes to Washington." *Washington Blade* (March 13, 2009): <http://polis.house.gov/News/DocumentPrint.aspx?DocumentID=115085>.

O'Bryan, Will. "Out in Congress." *Metro Weekly* (June 23, 2009): <http://www.metroweekly.com/feature/?ak=4231>.

Polis, Jared. U.S. House of Representatives website: <http://polis.house.gov>.

Roberts, Michael. "Young Blood: Rising Political Powerhouse Jared Polis Is Rich, Tireless, and Filled with Contradictions." *Denver Westworld* (August 19, 2004): <http://www.westworld.com/2004-08-19/news/young-blood>.

### **About the Author**

**Linda Rapp** teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of [www.glbtc.com](http://www.glbtc.com).