



Mark Takano.
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Takano, Mark (b. 1970)

by Linda Rapp

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In 2012 Mark Takano, a Japanese American from Riverside, California, became the first openly gay person of color elected to the United States House of Representatives.

Takano's grandparents and parents were living in Riverside in 1942, when, by order of the federal government, they were taken from their homes and placed in internment camps for the duration of World War II. As a result of their confinement, family members lost property that they had owned, but after the war they returned to Riverside County and managed to start over.

Despite the ugly history of discrimination that his family experienced, Mark Takano is a child of Riverside who would become its champion. Born there on December 10, 1970, he attended public schools and graduated as the valedictorian at La Sierra High School in 1979. He continued his education at Harvard, where he majored in government, with the intention of becoming a lawyer, perhaps one working for the Republican party.

"My whole family is Republican, and I was a Republican all the way through college," he told Geoffrey J. Hoffman of the *Harvard Crimson*. "But," he added mischievously, "my Harvard education really had an impact. It truly made me smarter. I became a Democrat."

Takano came to believe that Republicans had "lost their pragmatism" and were too "ideologically conservative, both economically and culturally." He noted examples of policies toward Central America, the "trickle-down" economic theory, restrictions on women's rights regarding reproduction, and the treatment of members of minority groups.

"From the minorities' point of view, the Republicans were incredibly divisive in their rhetoric. Most minorities felt they lost any sort of representation in government," he stated to Hoffman.

After graduating from Harvard in 1983, Takano worked briefly as a substitute teacher in the Boston area. He was struck by the differences in resources, experiences, and academic results between prosperous suburban districts and inner-city metropolitan schools.

This observation led him to make a commitment to public education, and so he returned to his native state and enrolled at the University of California at Riverside to earn a teaching credential. Upon receiving it in 1987, he became a faculty member in the Rialto Unified School District, specializing in classes on British literature.

Takano showed his dedication to public education by running for the Board of Trustees of Riverside Community College District in 1990. The next year he won the post of President, and he was returned to office in the next four quadrennial elections. In addition, he served on the Board of the Chancellor's Asian Pacific Islander Community Advisory Center at the University of California, Riverside.

Takano made his first stand for legislative office in 1992, running to represent the 43rd Congressional District of California in the United States House of Representatives. He won the primary but lost in the general election. He renewed his bid for the House in 1994, again besting the field in the primary to face incumbent congressman Ken Calvert in the general election.

Takano was not out publicly at the time, but word of his homosexuality reached the press, and speculation about his sexual orientation became front-page news in local newspapers. The Calvert campaign sent out mailings printed in pink and purple, and using coded language to ask if Takano was a more appropriate representative for San Francisco than for Riverside.

President Bill Clinton supported Takano's candidacy, sending in spokespersons including Tipper Gore and Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt to advance his cause, but he was once again defeated, and so he continued his work as a teacher at Rialto High School.

It was Rialto students who--unwittingly--sent him back on the path to political office when they asked for his help in founding a Gay-Straight Alliance at their school shortly after the 2008 election, in which California voters passed Proposition 8, striking down marriage equality in the state.

"When Prop 8 passed in California, it energized a group of students. I didn't know them and I didn't know what to do with the group, . . . but I couldn't let them down," Takano said in an interview with *Current*. "The students were, by and large, my inspiration for rethinking things" about another run for the House.

Nevertheless, he consulted family and friends who might not want to undergo another grueling and mean-spirited campaign. Receiving their support, he declared his candidacy for the newly redrawn 41st Congressional District.

Among those supporting him were openly gay Representatives Barney Frank of Massachusetts and Jared Polis of Colorado, both of whom hosted fund-raising events.

Takano stated to Chris Johnson of the *Washington Blade* that it saddened him that Frank would not be among his congressional colleagues if he won election since the estimable Massachusetts legislator had decided to retire. In a quip acknowledging Frank's witty and forthright manner, he added, "I really hoped as the first openly gay member of Congress who is a person of color that I [would] get to serve with the openly gay member of Congress who's the most colorful."

The 41st Congressional District was generally considered Democratic-leaning, but Republicans targeted it as a potentially winnable seat since their candidate, long-term Riverside County Supervisor John Tavaglione, was something of a moderate, having refused to sign on to activist Grover Norquist's categorical pledge never to raise taxes and also having a certain record of reaching across the aisle while working in county government.

Early on, it appeared that the race might be close, but Takano's support grew steadily, and on election day he trounced his opponent by more than 17 percent.

In his campaign, Takano was out and proud and unambiguous in his support for glbtq rights. He was pleased, however, that the homophobic tactics of the previous races were not employed this time around, itself a sign that homosexuality was no longer a potent "wedge issue."

Takano was thus able to give attention to a wider range of issues, including education, air quality, the welfare of senior citizens, the high unemployment rate in the district, and his differences with the Republicans over the budget advanced by their national ticket.

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