SUSAN TALAMANTES EGGMAN

"I've seen how a movement, with equal rights on its side, can go from 'impossible' in one generation to 'matter-of-fact' in the next generation. What has the Civil Rights struggle, the Gay Rights struggle, taught us if not that time rewards courage?"

The Many Traveled Roads of Identity

It's no surprise that most politicians have conflicted feelings about the packaging that sells them to voters. A political campaign, if they're not careful, can blur identity. Right before their eyes, the sharp edges of their personality get softened. The spice of their frankness turns to bland.

With the rise of social media and its stunted attention span, the emphasis on image and message has never been greater. Knowing the speed of communication—and its everywhere reach—a candidate works hard to avoid any slip of the tongue. In this way, a run for office can turn into a game of the meek. Like a big blender, it can homogenize even the most distinctive candidate.

So when you encounter a politician on the campaign trail who shows up to an event without a staffer, who wears Levi's jeans and a rolled up cotton shirt and socks designed in avocados, seemingly without calculation, who speaks without a single prepared note and presents not a processed image of herself but a complex and layered portrait—farmer's daughter, softball player, Army medic, social worker, university professor, councilwoman of a bankrupt city, committed member of the State Assembly, lesbian—you stop and take a closer look.

Susan Talamantes Eggman represents a 13th Assembly District that takes in much of Stockton and Tracy and a community called Mountain House, a piece of California just up the flat road from where she grew up. It's the spring of 2014, and she's running for a second term, all but assured of victory but still campaigning hard because that's how her parents taught her. Take nothing for granted. Yield to no one. Buck up. Their lessons have followed her from ball field to military, West Coast to East Coast and back again, as a caregiver to the dying, drug addicted and mentally ill, as a teacher and now a legislator.

Out and about in her district, fielding questions from the League of Women Voters of San Joaquin County or Delta farmers who believe they're getting the short end of California's water stick, she offers a peek at a life so full of varied experiences that she can spin her narrative in multiple directions, always engaging her audience.

She gives the impression of that uncommon politician who doesn't need to contort herself to find common ground with the people. Likewise, her last name—Talamantes Eggman—has its own dexterity. It just might be the longest surname in the annals of the State Legislature. Too many letters, for sure, to fit comfortably on a yard sign. You assume it's one of those hybrids born of marriage, surname wedded to surname, but then where's the

hyphen? It turns out that Talamantes and Eggman each honors a side of her family, her way of pointing to a past that not only explains her life and the lives that came before but something of California's identity, as well.

There's the Eggman on the backside. It belongs to her father, Shirley Ray Eggman, youngest of six boys who came to California by way of Dust Bowl Oklahoma, worldly belongings hitched to the back of a jitney. He grew up tough with a mean devil for a dad. Grandpa Eggman wanted in the worst way for his youngest to be a girl and when he wasn't, he gave him a girl's name anyway. Shirley was born in a tent in Gridley, the Butte County farm town along Highway 99. Growing up, he lived in labor camps with Latinos and blacks who had come west to pick the new tall cotton of California. It was, as they learned, the same old cruel. The family ended up settling on the east side of the San Joaquin Valley, in the citrus town of Terra Bella. That's where Shirley's older brother took up beekeeping as a 4H project. That's how Shirley got into honey as a life.

"My dad was the kid who went to school in his overalls with a biscuit in his front pocket," Talamantes Eggman said. "He had severe learning disabilities and because of poor nutrition he had a hearing loss. He couldn't read or write, and he would get into a fight quicker than you could see it coming. But he had an incredibly strong work ethic."

There's the Talamantes on the frontside. It belongs to her mother, Elvira Talamantes, born and raised in California and the first of her siblings to graduate from high school. The family had left Mexico back in the 1920s on the heels of Pancho Villa's revolution. Elvira's father and mother had moved to Benecia, the bayside town in Solano County, where he took a job with the railroad. They lived in a small house along an alleyway that Elvira's mother kept neat and clean, smelling of fresh tortillas and beans warming on the stove. After graduating from high school in the early 1950s, Elvira became a 411-operator with the local telephone company. That's how she met Shirley Ray Eggman.

"It's a funny story. My dad had moved to Benecia to milk cows. It was Jan. 1, and he wanted to call one of his brothers long distance to wish him Happy New Year's. He dials the local operator and reaches my mother. Well, my dad doesn't have the right number. The call can't be placed. And my mom starts to chew him out. 'Don't call me back until you've got the right number. The telephone isn't a toy, you know.'

"So Dad gets the right number and calls back. 'Can I have the operator who just bawled me out?' My mom gets on the line and they start to chat. They chat like that for a year until they finally meet in person."

It was 1953. An Okie marrying a Latina didn't go over well with either side. Elvira took one look at Terra Bella living—buckled linoleum in the kitchen, creaking wood planks in the living room, beds thrown up on the porch, screeching screen door, fighting cocks in the yard—and told Shirley she'd never be living there.

So they moved to Castro Valley in Alameda County, where he opened Ray Eggman's Produce Market. They became a real team. She did the books, and he bought the produce and ran the store. He was an artist at heart, painting these lovely signs that accompanied the displays of fruits and vegetables.

"My dad never stopped hustling. He grew pumpkins for the Halloween season and chopped down Christmas trees for Christmas. He built a still in the back and brewed his own apple cider and sold it. I think they were content in Castro Valley. But my dad always felt the pull of the Valley and his dream to do beekeeping full time."

They had waited eight years to have Susan. They waited four years more to have their middle child, Michael, and then four years again to have their youngest, Ellie. Because Cherokee ran strong in the Eggman blood, its high cheekbones and jet black hair, the siblings were never sure what side they took their dark, arresting looks from.

When Talamantes Eggman finished the seventh grade, her father persuaded her mother it was time to leave Castro Valley. Up and over the mountain they moved to a small farm in Turlock, a town known for its medic-alert bracelets and binds that tied up Thanksgiving turkey legs.

For Talamantes Eggman, the move down Highway 99 forged an unusual perspective. Unlike most of her fellow legislators in the LGBT caucus, whose lives were shaped by East Coast city or West Coast suburb, she would come to know a different kind of place—the pulse of the fields, the ebb and flow of farm workers, the harvests of fruits, nuts and vegetables that never seemed to end, the water that made everything bloom. For all its diversity, the Valley was a place that felt shut off from the outside world, a place of epic struggle and searing poverty and wealth concentrated in so few hands that it seemed a society near feudal.

"When we moved from the Bay Area to the Valley, it wasn't just a shift from city to rural," she said. "There was this whole division of races in the Valley, a kind of caste system, that I never encountered in the Bay Area. Whites and Mexicans didn't hang out together. My ethnic background never seemed to matter at my old school. Suddenly, it was strange that my mother was Latina and my father was white. Where do I fit in? Who

do I hang out with? All at once these became questions that a thirteen year old girl had to answer."

The wide open country, the freedom to hop on her horse and ride anywhere, made Turlock feel less closed in. And the family farm, its almond orchard and vegetable garden, its chickens and bee hives that her father managed—and the honey they bottled and sold as a family—became its own refuge, too. But if she had to point to one thing that saved her, it was the camaraderie of sports and its escape. In high school, she was tall enough to excel at the net in volleyball, but it was softball, playing first base and third base, batting fifth in the lineup, where she made her mark as lucky #13.

As it happened, softball is what allowed her to learn more about that odd feeling in the pit of her stomach. That funny gnaw. It wasn't just going to pass.

"I knew I had this feeling, but I just didn't know what it meant. As an adolescent, you first come to terms with it in the most innocent way. I told myself, 'If I were a boy, that teammate in center field is someone I would date.'

"It doesn't occur to you that there's another option, that you don't have to be a boy to feel that way about a girl. So the feeling was there for a long time before I ever confronted it in a direct way."

Her first relationship, first love, blossomed naturally right there on the softball field. She had no idea that more than one lesbian might be on the team; back in the late 1970s, none of them had any clue how to come out to each other.

"I was a senior and she was a sophomore, and one day we were hanging out at the big irrigation pond outside town. She said to me, 'I'm going to do something, and if you decide to hit me, please hit me with your left hand and not that clobbering right hand. Promise?' I was standing up against the retaining wall, and she leaned over and kissed me. And I didn't hit her."

Not surprisingly, their relationship, kept secret, was full of drama. When the other girl's parents put two and two together, they sent their daughter to a therapist and demanded that Talamantes Eggman, who was eighteen, stop seeing her. Her own parents didn't find out, but they knew something was amiss. Her grades had dropped, and she was talking about joining the Army.

One day, driving aimlessly about town, she saw the recruiting office in downtown Turlock, parked her car and walked in. She took the test and scored high. Sky's the limit, the recruiter told her. She signed up to be a medic.

"My mom tried to talk me out of it. 'Get your college degree first and if you still want to join after that, you can go in as an officer.' But my mind was set. I remember getting on that Greyhound and waving goodbye to my parents, and they were crying. Off to basic training in Alabama I went."

The long road to the South took her to a whole other kind of America. She rolled up late at night and was handed her fatigues and told to hit the bunk. The next morning, the screaming started. The company was a mix of men and women, but her platoon was one hundred percent female. And all their eyes now were on her. California girl.

"Who wants to call their family?" the drill sergeant shouted. "I do," she said.

"Okay then, the phone's in the main office. Start crawling, stomach to the floor."

The main office was across the hall and down three flights of stairs. As she crawled, the drill sergeant led the platoon in a hail of shouting. Out of nowhere practice grenades that produced smoke but no shrapnel started to go boom. She couldn't hear herself breathe, though she knew she was breathing hard. She kept crawling down one flight and another and another.

"Belly to the floor! Belly to the floor!" the drill sergeant yelled.

When she finally reached the main office and picked up the phone, he looked her straight in the eye. "Call your momma and tell her that you love it here. That you love it so much you're never coming home."

No way was she going to tell her mother that. Jaw set firm, an "F-You" in her throat, she dialed the number home.

"Mom, is that you?"

They tried to talk, but the screams and shouts never let up. Her mother hung up in tears.

Eight weeks later, she was off to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio to receive her combat medical training. A third of the females at Fort Sam, she discovered, were lesbian: black women from the South, farm girls from the Midwest, lots of young women escaping big city poverty.

"I was there for twelve weeks. The unofficial rule was an early version of 'Don't ask, don't tell,' but it was pretty wide open. I had my first experience going to gay bars. In San Antonio, the women had big hair and big hats and big belt buckles. 'I'm a Valley girl,' I told myself. 'I can handle this.'"

Now a trained medic, she was assigned in 1980 to Fort Meade Army Hospital in suburban Maryland, her first experience with the East Coast, though the sticks of Maryland sure felt like another kind of South. There, she discovered she had the stomach to handle blood and tissue. She did surgery prep and sutures in the emergency room before taking a post in the urology clinic. Pecker duty, they called it. The retirees came in for their prostate biopsies, the active duty fathers came in for their vasectomies,

and the younger service men came in up for their circumcisions.

"We did circumcisions every Thursday. A lot of the guys had grown up in the rural South, where the procedure wasn't done, and they wanted to look like the other guys. After awhile, I was performing the circumcisions by myself. I learned how to do all the hard cuts," she says with a chuckle.

One day she was guarding the barracks, signing people in and out, when a medic in a mint green uniform walked past, flouncing down the hall. She was tall with brown hair and green eyes. One of the other girls remarked, "There's one of your homies, a California girl," and Talamantes Eggman took a second look. Her name was Renee Hall and she was from Oroville. She had been assigned to the same medic unit and, as it so happened, played a mean center field. They became starters on the Fort Meade softball team.

"Renee wasn't out yet. All her previous relationships had been with boys. We struck up a real friendship, and one thing led to another. I was already living off post, in an apartment with three other women, and she came over to spend the night. The next day, she shows up with two suitcases, a blue and pink hard shell Samsonite, and moves in. We've been a couple ever since."

Before Talamantes Eggman's four-year service commitment was up, Hall was transferred to Germany to work in an Army hospital there. Hall joined the softball team not knowing the Army was conducting a witch hunt for lesbians on the squad. During an interrogation, she admitted to brass that she was a lesbian and found herself promptly discharged. Upon returning to Maryland, she and Talamantes Eggman began making plans to head back home to California and start a life together.

Over the years, Talamantes Eggman's coming out to her family had been like a version of the kid's game Marco Polo. With every hint, her parents moved closer to where she was hiding. When she was eighteen, she had gotten a tattoo that she initially concealed from them. "Mom," she blurted out one day. "I have something to tell you." When she showed her the tattoo, she could see the immense relief in her mother's face. Thank God, her mother seemed to be saying. I've been spared the "I'm gay" pronouncment.

But it would come now, four years later, in a phone call home from the urology clinic at Kimbrough Hospital in Fort Meade.

"Mom and Dad, I've got something to tell you. I can tell you on the phone now or I can tell you in person when I come home."

"Tell us later," her mother said. "Tell us now," her father insisted.

"I'm lesbian, and I'm coming home and bringing Renee with me."

"I knew it," her father replied. "It started with that girl on the softball team in high school." "Yes."

"Can we talk about this later?" her mother said.

Months earlier, her mother had visited Fort Meade to celebrate her daughter's graduation from the urology program. During the visit, she had gotten to know and like Renee.

"My parents were wonderfully accepting. There was never a question that they weren't going to love me. It was more that they were sad. 'Oh, her life is going to be hard.' Remember, this is 1983. There are no successful LGBT people out of the closet, at least not in the San Joaquin Valley and certainly not in Turlock. There was talk that Rock Hudson was as 'fruity as a three-dollar bill,' but there were no examples for us."

As they prepared for their cross-country trip, Talamantes Eggman and Hall were joined by three friends —Vicky, Tina and Rita—who grew up in other parts of America and regarded California as some dreamland that gave hope for even those inhabiting the fringe. They figured they could save on the costs of travel, and have more fun, if they went by van. So Susan sold her 78 Camaro and Vicky sold her Mustang, and they bought a three-speed Dodge with enough room, barely, to sleep five.

"And so we hit the road, five lesbians just discharged from the U.S. Army. Vicky and Tina were a couple and crazy Rita was unattached. We took our sweet time. Vicky was from Cape Cod, Mass., and we stayed there. Tina was from lower Alabama and we stayed there. We stopped off in New Orleans planning to spend a day and stayed longer. And then we drove to California.

"The plan was for all of us to find jobs in the medical field, but that proved a lot harder than we anticipated. We eventually landed at my mom and dad's farmhouse in Turlock."

Her mom, Elvira, ever dutiful, played madre to them all. She wasn't a demonstrative woman, but the bond between her and Susan had always been tight. She and her daughter had each been saddled with the role of Big Sister, the eldest child who didn't complain about the lion's share of filial responsibility falling on her. Even so, when Susan and her friends started apartment hunting, Elvira looked forward to having her neat little farmhouse to herself again.

The five friends found an apartment in town and moved in together. Talamantes Eggman did "mows and blows" for a landscaper and learned how to prune trees; Hall started working in the dermatology unit at a Modesto hospital. After six months of communal living, Talamantes Eggman and Hall decided to get a

place of their own and found a cute little A-frame in Turlock.

Talamantes Eggman enrolled at nearby Stanislaus State and declared psychology as a major. She nursed a young man afflicted with extreme cerebral palsy and then landed a job on the night shift at a local drug and alcohol rehab program. Based on the Synanon model, the Phoenix House was built around marathon group sessions known as The Game. Buses would arrive from Los Angeles in the dead of night carrying Bloods and Crips strung out on heroin and crack.

"I learned very quickly to not be afraid and to not back down. I'd call bullshit for bullshit, and the patients could see I had the stomach to act. It was a double life, work and school. I'd go home and study all day."

Even as her new life absorbed her, she didn't lose touch with the past. Around town, she had come across her old girlfriend from the softball team and could tell that she was struggling. In the grips of bipolar disease and recreational drugs, the young woman had been in and out of treatment programs for meth addiction. Her desperate parents turned to Talamantes Eggman for help. All the grief they had caused her years before, she might have told them to go to hell. But she was a nurse and friend.

"We were going to have a Fourth of July party at our house, and I called her up. 'Come on over. We'd love to have you.' She told me, 'I can't. I have to get a haircut.' That was odd."

Talamantes Eggman called her house the next day and learned that her friend had cut off all her bangs and shot herself in the forehead. She was found in the bathtub. Still alive. Now on life support. She drove to the intensive care unit and met the girl's parents. It was the right thing to do to let go. They took her off life support and harvested her organs. "She never left Turlock. Her whole life, good and bad, was contained by that one place."

The Modesto Psychiatric Center, hearing of Talamantes Eggman's good work at the Phoenix House, recruited her to join the staff. She signed on with a nice raise in pay. This was the mid 1980s, and the nation was busy emptying its mental wards in the name of de-institutionalization. The 30-day residential treatment model for mental illness and drug addiction quickly turned into an insurance game, she said. As long as patients had coverage, no matter how defiant they might be, they got to stay and make mockery of treatment.

"We had this one patient, a big prison guard, and he pulled a stunt, and I told him, 'You are out of here!' I threw him out, and the next day he was back. Because he still had more time on his insurance card, the bosses made me apologize to him. I could see then that insurance was the tail that wagged the dog. That was the day I turned in my badge."

She had started her master's thesis in social work and took a job overseeing hospice care at Emanuel Medical Center in Turlock. Sitting with the terminally ill, listening to the stories that carried them to death, she felt like she was a passenger on some train that moved from fog to clear, fog to clear. She had no idea it would serve as such vital groundwork for what was to come in her own family.

Her grandmother Talamantes, always fiercely independent, had begun to lose her memory. In sixty years of California living, she had never bothered to learn to drive. She walked everywhere. One day she was walking from the bank to her favorite lunch spot, Kentucky Fried Chicken, when a car struck her. Her injuries were such that she needed full-time care.

Talamantes Eggman and Hall weren't about to let her go into a nursing home. So they moved her from a hospital in Napa, where she was tied down to a bed, to their house in Turlock. Talamantes Eggman was finishing her master's at Stanislaus State and Hall was completing her bachelor's degree, and they traded night and day shifts, with help from outside nurses.

"My grandmother lived with us for two years. She became one of the girls. When we went on camping trips, we packed her up in our Westfalia van and took off to the mountains. She would sleep on the bottom bunk and we would sleep on the top.

"Grandma would have these flights of delusions every sundown. Sundowners, we called them. She'd be with us and then suddenly she'd be back in Benecia or Mexico. She'd say, 'I have to go home now and make beans for my father.'"

She died in 1995. By then, Talamantes Eggman's mother, Elvira, was suffering from an ailment that sent her to intensive care. The doctors couldn't figure out what it was. Her kidneys were shutting down, and large clots were blocking her blood flow. Her lungs were functioning at only fifteen percent capacity.

Talamantes Eggman and her brother, Michael, took breaks from the emergency room to do some research at the medical library. They came across a rare autoimmune disorder known as Wegener's granulomatois, a swelling of vessels that chokes off blood to the organs.

"We came up with this diagnosis and told the doctors to 'Think about this. Maybe it's a possibility.' It turned out that we were right. My mom slowly got better but never returned to normal."

One of Talamantes Eggman's professors nominated her for a program that provided $30,000 in student loans that would be forgiven if she agreed to teach in the California State University system. She gladly accepted the offer but before taking a

teaching position, she decided to get her Ph.D in social work. She applied to a program in Hawaii and one in South Carolina before choosing to attend Portland State University. The program was highly regarded, for one, and the city had become an explosion of microbreweries, farmer's markets, fine coffee and garden fresh food.

Her research project focused on reforming the child welfare system so that it embraced a so-called "strength-based" model. Rather than take a punitive approach, it sought to build on whatever strengths a child and his family could muster. A social worker went into the community looking for the best limbs to graft onto.

To pay the bills, she worked the weekend night shift in the emergency room at a local hospital. There, she saw all manner of patients and their ills: domestic violence, child abuse, mental breakdown, suicide, car wrecks. She recalls one midnight shift when she was about to clock out but stayed to help receive a young female patient from Portland's southside. The girl had stabbed herself in the chest and hands.

Dressed in a robe, blonde straggly hair parted down the middle, the girl entered the hospital in a hallucinatory state.

Ironically, she was telling Talamantes Eggman not to worry, that everything was going to be okay.

"I called her family. 'Is there anything I need to know?' They told me she had a history of bipolar, not taking her meds, locking herself in her room. We ended up admitting her, and I went home and tried to get some sleep. The next morning, I woke up and it suddenly hit me. It was Easter morning. This girl had tried to reenact the crucifixion. She was trying to do to her body what had been done to Jesus."

Over time, Talamantes Eggman and Hall grew to love the Pacific Northwest. Hall was active in their neighborhood group and Talamantes Eggman became a representative on the faculty research, tenure and promotions committee. They traveled up and down the coasts of Oregon and Washington and through the mountain ranges of Idaho, looking, in the words of Talamantes Eggman, for "all the things that make us feel small."

She graduated with top honors, receiving the president's award for excellence, and could have easily made her professional mark in Oregon. But she could feel the pull of home and her parents: her father building his apiary business to hundreds of hives even as he grew more weary; her mother silently battling the progression of her disease.

In 2001, after five years in Portland, she and Hall returned to the Valley. She took a teaching post in social work at Sacramento State, commuting back and forth to Turlock every day. Hall went to work for Eggman Farms, helping Shirley bottle his honey and then market it in San Francisco.

Hooked to dialysis lines, Elvira insisted on making one last trip to see her daughter formally present ("defend") her dissertation. Then six months later, wracked with pain, the blood clots taking over her body, she was told she would have to go to the hospital again. This time Talamantes Eggman wanted her mother to know there was another choice. She walked into the back bedroom of the farmhouse and sat down beside her.

"Mom, you don't have to do this again. You don't have to go to the hospital if you don't want to." "Oh honey," she said, her eyes staring up from her bed. "I'm so tired."

Talamantes Eggman summoned her brother, sister and other family members, along with the physician and hospice worker. Shirley Eggman, called in from his bees, could see the resolve in his oldest child's face. He began to protest.

"No," he yelled. "She's not going to die like this."

Talamantes Eggman patiently explained that this was precisely how mom wanted to die: in her bedroom, on the farm they had built together, surrounded by the almond trees near harvest and the bees. Her father stopped yelling and began to sob.

She laid her mother down, disconnected the dialysis machine and gave her a kiss. Two days later, she died.

"I tried to put her life in perspective. She had always been the stoic one. Being a farmer's wife was not her piece of heaven, but she made the best of it. She became a hospice volunteer, one of the first Spanishspeaking ones in our area. Easter and Thanksgiving always happened at our house, her kitchen. 'Don't be a complainer,' she told us. 'Buck up.' When we got sick, she nursed us. She made us breakfast every day and packed our lunches, and we had a sit down dinner every night. Our clothes were clean, our rooms were neat. She ran a very disciplined household.

"And when I came out, I never had any fear that she would reject me. I knew I would be loved. I owed her so much. She taught me how to be brave."

Talamantes Eggman and Hall had bought a 1918 Craftsman bungalow in the Victory Park section of Stockton, near downtown, trying to replicate the feeling of that neighborhood in Portland where so many cultures had blended into a tight-knit, progressive community.

Returning to the classroom, she found herself almost paralyzed by grief. Strangely, she was burdened by guilt, too. Why? What more could she have done for her mother? She knew it was crazy, but that's how she

felt. It wasn't until Hall was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2004 that she snapped out of it. "She needed me tough," Talamantes Eggman said.

That November, a day after the reelection of George W. Bush, she walked into a faculty meeting at Sacramento State that felt almost like a wake. Professors in her department were wallowing in a deep funk about having to live through four more years of Bush governance. "What are we going to do?" was the general lament. Talamantes Eggman had a quick reply.

"Buck up. We need to take government in our own hands. Next open office, I'm running," she vowed.

Truth be known, Bush's reelection was only part of what motivated her. She had been thinking about her mother's belief that politics could be a higher calling, how Elvira Talamantes Eggman used to sit down in front to the TV every day during the Watergate hearings of 1973, studying how seven senators from both parties, partisan politics cast aside, dug for the truth without fear or favor. How fascinated her mother had been by the interplay between Democratic chair Sam J. Ervin of North Carolina and Republican ranking member Howard H. Baker of Tennessee.

"She told us that was one of her favorite times. Had she been born a generation later, my mom might have been a political activist. She was very Catholic but progressive, pro-choice, in favor of legalizing marijuana."

In 2006, a seat opened up on the Stockton City Council, right in her backyard. Even though no openly gay person had ever run for office in the San Joaquin Valley, she decided the time was right. Stockton's proximity to the Bay Area gave it a bit of "purple" hue. And though the Valley as a whole tilted conservative, Stockton itself was a diverse city—forty percent Latino, thirty seven percent white, twelve percent African-American and seven percent Asian.

Her opponent was Beverly Foster, a black member of the school board who had the support of the mayor, city council and board of supervisors. Foster sent out a mailer featuring politicians from both sides of the aisle declaring, "We don't agree on much, but one thing we all agree on is Beverly Foster for City Council."

The race took an unfortunate turn when Foster introduced herself at an NAACP forum as "God's candidate," the one who was married to "my soulmate." Talamantes Eggman naturally took this as a not-sosubtle swipe at her sexual orientation. On the campaign trail, she didn't shy away from introducing Renee Hall as her partner for "more than twenty five years."

Foster charged that Talamantes Eggman's campaign contributions were coming from wealthy donors who didn't live in the city. But a breakdown of the donor list showed that eighty-four percent had given checks of $100 or less, and most lived in the city or county. It was a hard-fought campaign pitting two sides that could each claim their roots in disenfranchisement. When the ballots were counted, Talamantes Eggman had garnered fifty-four percent of the vote, becoming the first Latina to be elected to the Stockton City Council.

The black community itself had been split, and now some were having a hard time accepting Foster's loss. Just how bitter the feelings remained became clear to Talamantes Eggman after her official seating in January, 2007, when she attended a function at a black church on Stockton's east side. Speakers were talking about the strength of black women, and the congregation responded with raucous clapping. Then Talamantes Eggman got up to read a city proclamation celebrating the opening of the church's fellowship hall next door.

Standing next to the bishop and minister, readying the scissors to cut the tape, Talamantes Eggman heard a man shout from the audience.

"Aren't you a lesbian? Aren't you a lesbian? You can't be here. You've got to leave." The scrawny little man with gray hair, bald on top, repeated his words.

The bishop and the minister said nothing. Neither did any member of the congregation. For a moment, Talamantes Eggman waited for someone, anyone, to correct the man and defend her right to be there.

"I looked out at the audience, but no one said a word," she recalled. "It felt like what my mother used to tell me about 'No Mexicans Allowed Here.' What could I do? The room was silent except for the echo of this man's voice. So I walked out to my car and drove home. My friends came over, and we fixed Margaritas."

The next day, stun gave way to pride and anger. She was a duly elected member of the city council. She was the church's invited guest. It was a house of God. It was her birthday, to boot. No one treated Shirley and Elvira's daughter like that. She called the mayor and told him she would be publicly addressing the incident at the next city council meeting. He told her that he supported her. Then she called a prominent member of the black community, who pledged her support, as well.

On the night of the city council meeting, during the public comment period, Talamantes Eggman did a double take. The minister from the church, a contrite look on his face, was walking up to the podium with a potted plant in his hands. He spoke directly to her.

"An unfortunate incident occurred at our church this past weekend," he began. "You were our invited guest. It was your birthday.

You deserved to be treated with respect and you weren't. I hope you will accept this gift as our apology. We need you."

She assured him that fences could be mended.

Now came the task of governing Stockton, which proved more daunting than she ever imagined. Stockton was already known as "Murder City" for it violent crime, and Forbes magazine would soon take its own cheap shot, naming Stockton "the most miserable place to live in the U.S." And now no city in the nation was taking a bigger hit from the foreclosure crisis than Stockton, a consequence of more than a decade of speculative housing growth.

There was plenty of blame to go around, but most critics pointed in one of two directions: the overly generous pension and health care benefits given to public employee unions; the hundreds of millions of dollars in bond debt used to redevelop downtown with a new events center, hotel, marina, theater, rink and ballpark.

Talamantes Eggman understood the need to transform downtown, even if the timing of the projects proved unfortunate. But when she looked at the debt that saddled the city, she could see the real time bomb was the burden of employee pension and health benefits. Given her regard for unions, this was a conclusion that pained her. But she could see no other way than to cut the benefits package and reduce the level of police and fire service.

"Professionally, it was the most difficult decision in my life," she explained. "But we were facing the eye of the foreclosure storm, and revenues weren't going to come back for a while. So a tough call had to be made and when the council made it, the unions turned on us."

Her four years on the council felt like triage. Even so, she sought and won another term. Then in 2012 she learned that the 13th Assembly District, forever a hodgepodge, had been redrawn to take in much of Stockton and pieces of the Delta, including Tracy. She was excited by the possibility of serving many of the same constituents, only now from the perch of the State Legislature and its more global vantage.

Going into the primary, she could count on the cops and firefighters supporting one of her opponents, and she wasn't likely to get the backing of agriculture, either. Farmers didn't like the fact that Dolores Huerta, co-founder of the United Farm Workers, was in her corner. But she had a strong base in the neighborhoods of Stockton, where she was a familiar face. And her precinct walkers were second to none. Their devotion to her was in no small part due to her routinely feeding them carne asada tacos, wine and beer at parties in her backyard. "Getting good people to walk for me has never been a problem," she says with a wry grin.

In the five-candidate primary race, she won convincingly with nearly forty percent of the vote. Given the district's clear Democratic edge in registration, the general election race against Republican K. Jeffrey Jafri looked to be a cakewalk. The Stockton Record praised her for her "calm, intelligent and effective" leadership. She ended up winning in a landslide.

In her victory speech at a waterfront warehouse, she noted that she would be the first gay and first Latina to represent the Stockton area in the State Assembly. "This is a part of California that is often overlooked, and I hope to bring an end to that," she said.

A few months later, she was called back to the farm. Her father had died doing what he loved. She was heartened knowing that all that he had worked for had been passed on to capable hands. Her little brother, Michael, had taken over the apiary business and the almond trees. And now moved by his sister's example, he was running for Congress as a pragmatic Democrat.

Looking back, she couldn't quite put her hands on it, but something in the dust of that farm and reach of family tree had given them a perspective that was neither stereotypically left nor right, a belief in hard work and ingenuity but also in the role of government to make sure the game wasn't rigged to benefit the rich, a belief that obstacles to immigration were more about fear and race than what was good and right for America.

"There's an independence that living on the farm teaches you. You're dealing with nature and the manipulation of nature, and there's no room for B.S.," she said. "You find out very quickly what works and what doesn't work, or you sink. I think that's what we learned from the farm and our parents, and it's a point of view that has certainly shaped me as a politician."

The chair of the Assembly's Committee on Agriculture, she has become an insistent voice on behalf of Delta farmers who fear that the health of the estuary—and their water supply—is being adversely affected by the big industrial farms of Fresno County's westside.

"When it comes to state and federal water being moved north to south through the Delta, I'm concerned about the outsized influence of big farmers in the middle of the state," she said. "A strong argument can be made that they're farming more acres than they should, and California hardly needs to plant more almonds and pistachios."

She opposes the Brown Administration's plan to construct Twin

Tunnels along the Sacramento River as a way of moving snowmelt north to south, fearing it will only suck down the Delta and make its waters more salty. “Why spend billions and billions on a project that won’t create a single new drop of water?” she asks.

One of her goals is to champion more progressive End-of-Life practices. She knows it will be a divisive issue, and a long road. But she can hear her mother’s voice, and the voices of those terminally ill patients, nudging her forward.

“It’s going to be a real struggle and battle,” she says. “But I’ve seen how a movement, with equal rights on its side, can go from ‘impossible’ in one generation to ‘matter-of-fact’ in the next generation. What has the Civil Rights struggle, the Gay Rights struggle, taught us if not that time rewards courage?”