

# RICHARD GORDON



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## Minister on the Frontlines

**HALF MOON BAY, CALIF.** —It’s a gorgeous July morning, California sublime in every way, and Assemblyman Richard Gordon is tooling along Highway 1 in his red Camry hybrid, going home to his district.

The clock says he’s late for his first meeting of the day, but you won’t find him speeding. This stretch of legendary road is dangerous for the simple reason you can’t keep your eyes straight ahead. The Pacific, all its violence and peace, is right next to you, demanding a long gaze, if not a photo. But no cell phone in the world can capture this picture: waves crashing into giant rock, white foam, white sand, white lighthouse high on the outcropping, piercing the blue sky.

Each time he travels this piece of California, Gordon is reminded of his good fortune. His 24th Assembly District is hard to beat when it comes to iconic images of the Golden State. On the other side of the coastal range, from Menlo Park to Sunnyvale, the

district takes in Google, Facebook, LinkedIn, Intel, Hewlett Packard and Stanford University. Only a few weeks earlier, he had toured the Sunnyvale headquarters of Intuitive Surgical, the builder of the da Vinci robot that is changing the way surgeons perform low-risk operations.

Today, dressed in hiking boots, chinos and a blue oxford shirt, his trademark yellow tie somewhere in the back seat, Gordon is heading to TomKat Ranch, an 1,800-acre cattle spread in the green hills of Pescadero, where the electric fences are all solar powered and the beef is one hundred percent grass fed. The ranch belongs to hedge fund billionaire Tom Steyer and his wife, Katherine Taylor, who are fast giving away their fortune to progressive causes that protect the environment and advance new (old) ways of growing food.

A short jaunt from the coastline, past poppies and tules, past the Pescadero cemetery, Gordon parks

his car and hops into a double cab Dodge Ram. It’s caked with dust and crammed with tour guides, including two of the ranchers who lease and work TomKat’s land. Over the next hour, standing amid the oak-studded hills, the assemblyman learns about the raising of happy cows, pigs, ducks, rabbits, turkeys and chickens, whose droppings feed the natural grass which in turn feeds the cows. He hears how the biggest challenge of biodynamic farming (a realm beyond organic) isn’t raising beef and poultry without antibiotics or finding customers willing to pay the higher prices but locating a boutique slaughterhouse and butcher shop within one hundred miles that specialize in righteous meats.

Gordon’s manner is not one to play the part of politician gracing his constituents with a stately visit. He doesn’t slap backs. He doesn’t hog center stage. Except for a few pinpoint questions, his resonant voice,

perfect for radio, remains quiet. At noon, he heads back up Highway 1 to Half Moon Bay for lunch and then a hearing of the Assembly Select Committee on Sea Level Rise and the California Economy. He chairs the session in the same skilled but non-intrusive way.

By the time his district day is over, Richard Sherman Gordon, sixty five—once a Methodist preacher, once a married man who finally confided to his wife that he was gay after they went to see a movie about the life of a married man hiding in the same closet, once known as the first openly gay man to be elected to local and then state office in San Mateo County—has gone a whole ten hours without once being asked to address an issue of the “gay agenda.”

This is no surprise to him. Unlike many of his fellow members in the legislature’s LGBT caucus, Gordon operates almost completely free of the expectations of being gay and a politician, or, more precisely, a gay politician. It’s not that he isn’t proud of his identity, quite the contrary, but on a day-to-day basis it rarely becomes a call to action. Maybe this is rooted in his constituency. Largely suburban and sitting in a kind of exile from San Francisco, the 24th District is hardly a hotbed of gay activism. Or maybe it stems from the fact that the epic battles of the gay civil rights movement mostly have been fought and won. Whatever the cause, it seems to suit Gordon’s personality and worldview. Confident but not brash, sure footed but not cocky, he doesn’t like to be pigeonholed. Maybe owing to his religious training, he sees life as bigger than that.

“Let’s not fool ourselves. There’s still a lot to be done on the gay rights front. But the fact that I spend a great deal of my time working on broader issues is a measure of the great progress the LGBT community has

made,” he says.

“There’s a cartoon hanging in my office. It shows Annise Parker, the first lesbian mayor of Houston, moving a bunch of boxes into City Hall. Each one has a different label. ‘Police.’ ‘Economy.’ ‘Fiscal Responsibility.’ The punch line is: ‘The Gay Agenda Revealed.’ More and more, I think that’s true. The ‘Gay Agenda’ is no different than the usual agenda.”

The profiles of the LGBT caucus members are fascinating



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for the unusual roads traveled, for the tight-knit ethnic and religious communities broken free from, for the courage summoned, far beyond any conventional notion of political guts, to confront and accept who you are and speak it to the world, for the willingness to tell the stories without fear or adornment. Like the others, Gordon’s road begins as a kid who doesn’t know yet he’s carrying a secret because the secret is still taking form. It’s a feeling deep in the pit of his

being that he can’t put words to.

He’s the oldest of three children, the only boy whose two little sisters are Margie and Susan. His parents were solid people. His father, Ralph Gordon, came from Pennsylvania, a small coal mining town you can’t even find on a map. That’s where his father’s father, a Scotsman, ran the company store. His mother, Bettyanne Sherman, grew up in California, the daughter of a car dealer. She and Ralph met near the end of World War II, when he was briefly stationed in San Francisco on his way to duty in Hawaii. At a USO dance, gliding across the hardwood, it seemed almost like fate. Bettyanne’s father had just been asked by Ford to take over its dealership in Honolulu. She and Ralph, it so happened, were going in the same direction.

They courted in Hawaii, married and moved back to San Francisco. Ralph went to work for his father-in-law selling Dodges and Chryslers and Plymouths. They bought a home in Hillsborough at the bend of a cul-de-sac, where the houses gave way to acres of open fields and rolling hills. “It was like living in the country,” the assemblyman recalled of his childhood. “You could wander forever and in the springtime there were natural ponds, and I’d chase down tadpoles and watch the pollywogs turn into frogs.”

Every August, the last two weeks before school, the family drove down to Southern California and rented a place on Balboa Island. His father, in particular, fell in love with the whole scene and kept making plans to move there. In 1962, he made good on the threat, pulling up stakes for the little town of Costa Mesa. Here was new suburbia eating at the edges of strawberry and bean land. Here were kids roaming in packs atop bicycles. Here was Orange County before the 405 freeway and South Coast Plaza.

“I arrive at this new school as a freshman. Costa Mesa High. It’s fairly large, about 2,000 students, and I immediately became active in student government and got involved in the choir and singing.”

He found his voice on stage during his junior year, grabbing the lead part as Captain Corcoran in the Gilbert and Sullivan musical “H.M. S. Pinafore.” His senior year, he played the romantic lead of a rebellious Amish teen in “Plain and Fancy,” a musical about a New York couple whose car breaks down in Pennsylvania’s Amish country. “Thank goodness I found the stage because I wasn’t much of an athlete,” he said. “I was the kid who was picked last for the baseball team and put into right field because no one hit it out there. In high school, I did go out for the tennis team, and the coach finally came up to me and encouraged me to quit.”

His confidence did not suffer. He decided to run for student body president against a senior named Jim Ferryman, star quarterback and captain of the football team. What made the campaign unique was the school’s requirement that all candidates stand before the student body and deliver a speech on why they deserved to be elected. This obviously played into Gordon’s strength. As it turned out, Ferryman’s skills under the Friday night lights did not extend to the lectern. The difference between the two speeches was so stark—Gordon glowing, Ferryman fizzling—that the vote was a foregone conclusion. The thespian beat the quarterback.

“I decided to wear a yellow sweater for the speech and after it went so well, I developed a superstition. In all my elections since, I always wear yellow on election day. Yellow sweater. Yellow shirt. Yellow tie.”

The confusion he could never pin down as a kid—the allowance

of childhood—became a kind of interrogation as he faced the rigid social groupings of high school. Awareness awakened, it forced you to either declare yourself or hide. Back then, even in the midst of the rebellion-inspired Sixties, there was no such thing as gay. You were a homo at best, especially if your family members, like the Gordons, were devoutly religious. So he choose to hide—from them, from himself.

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family, were all very negative about homosexuality. It was evil. It was a sin. Horrible, crazy people did it. So as a teenager, trying to figure out who I am, why I feel attracted to men, I went through a rather extended phase of telling myself, “That’s not truly who I am.’ I spent a considerable amount of psychic energy denying it.”

He left home to attend USC, found an apartment with some college buddies and landed a part-time job at Disneyland—Fantasyland to be exact. He broke in as one of the

operators of “It’s A Small World,” an assignment that practically drove him nuts. The song’s refrain, “It’s a small world, after all,” played over and over on an endless loop that resounded even in his sleep. He soon got a reprieve, moving to the King Arthur Carousel and then to the Mad Tea Party and finally to Dumbo the Flying Elephant—rides that required him to join the Teamsters Union, his first taste of the benefits of organized labor.

By the end of his freshman year, he discovered that his father had been keeping his own monumental secret. It was a Sunday afternoon, Father’s Day, and his dad had taken his mom and two sisters, Margie and Susan, to see the Angels play in Anaheim. They had a perfectly enjoyable time. Back at home, in the middle of a steak dinner, Ralph Gordon decided to come clean. He reached into his wallet and pulled out a photo of a two-year-old girl.

“Since this is Father’s Day,” he announced, “let me introduce you to my other daughter. I have a second family.”

His revelation, which had the aplomb of a sick joke, came without warning. How else to describe the impact but that it shattered everything.

As his shift ended at Disneyland that night, an unsuspecting Gordon called home to wish his dad a happy Father’s Day. His mother, her voice stricken, answered the phone.

“Something horrible has happened,” she told him. “Your father has a daughter by another woman.”

The other woman was a customer. She and her husband had bought a car from his dad.

The betrayal struck Gordon hard. Busy at school and work, he had no inkling of any troubles. Now, all that seemed true in their home life turned out to be an enormous lie. His father divorced his mother and married the mistress. His sisters cut

off all ties to him. Gordon himself struggled to work through a more complicated reaction. He regarded his father not as a cruel and callous man but as a deeply flawed individual whose weaknesses were made worse by alcohol. He thought it best that he keep an open door to him, and they maintained a “strained and awkward” relationship.

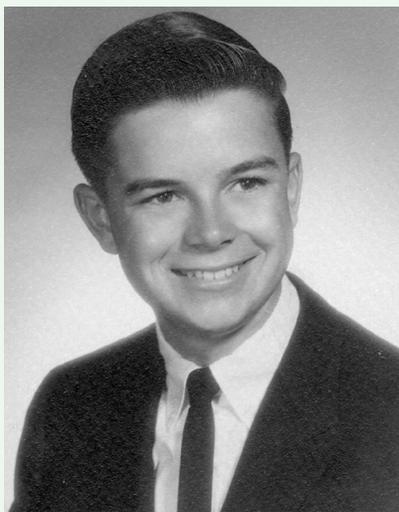
As a consequence of the split, finances became tight. To remain in school, Gordon took on more hours at work and cobbled together loans and scholarship grants. He switched majors from political science to sociology and discovered his passion: the anti-war and black civil rights movements of the Sixties, particularly the role of the radical ministry—priests, rabbis, Catholic brothers such as the Berrigans—in bringing about real social and political change.

He was accepted to Garrett Theological Seminary on the campus of Northwestern University and made his way to the Windy City. The seminary was the kind of place that encouraged its students to plunge into the messy world; Gordon soon found himself a volunteer on the frontlines of George McGovern’s 1972 presidential campaign, even traveling to Los Angeles to help with the California effort. When it was over, he returned to Chicago bitten by the political bug.

He finished seminary and received his Masters in Divinity, which meant he now had a ticket, as a Methodist minister, to do the real work of social justice. He headed into Chicago’s most beleaguered neighborhoods and ministered to homeless street children. It wasn’t easy gaining their trust but Gordon had a quiet, determined knack. Just as he was making real progress, he received word from church officials that they had new plans for him.

Because he had first joined the

ministry while living in Southern California, the bishop out west controlled his placement. He was told there was a church in Oceanside, in the shadow of the U.S. Marine Corps base at Camp Pendleton, that needed a minister. Gordon was torn. He felt whole in the church, but he knew there was no honest way he could take such an assignment. An answer “No” would equate to ecclesiastical insubordination, but he saw no other choice. He would have to leave the



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“It would have been inconsistent of me, and probably philosophically dishonest, to take the job. I had been very active in the anti-war movement. The wives and children of the Marines deserved someone with different politics to minister to them.”

As he continued to work with poverty-stricken children in Chicago, he faced a choice in his personal life. He had been dating girls since high school and developed a deep connection to a woman he had met

at a Methodist church in the San Fernando Valley. Terri Tedford was a student at UC Santa Barbara and had followed Gordon to Chicago. They had been living together for two years now, their relationship only growing fonder. What better way to honor their love than to get married, he figured. So they tied the knot in 1974 and moved back to California.

Gordon found a job with the YMCA in Fullerton doing youth and family counseling. He was there for two years when he read about a job opening at the Redwood City YMCA, which needed a social worker to run its own program for troubled youth. Gordon applied and was hired. The San Mateo County native, gone for fifteen years, was heading back home.

He oversaw a federally-funded project that reached out to youth arrested by police and provided them with immediate counseling. The goal was to keep young men and women out of jail and put them on a different path. Under Gordon’s eye, the intervention efforts made such a difference that the federal government decided to underwrite a second program—a shelter for runaway kids called Your House.

He became so adept at providing services to troubled youth that when the YMCA decided to shift missions, he was there to fill the vacuum. Gordon formed his own non profit, Youth and Family Assistance, that partnered up with San Mateo County. Over time, it grew from four employees and a \$100,000 budget to sixty employees and a \$5 million budget.

By the early 1980s, Gordon was running a teen health clinic and centers that counseled families beset by drugs, alcohol and domestic violence. All he could see, though, were the holes that still plagued the system. He was looking to do more. That’s when he came upon an old

See's Candy building in downtown Redwood City and drew up plans, at least in his head, of converting it to a job training center for youth.

He approached city officials with his idea, but they balked. They told him they had another vision for downtown revitalization that focused on restaurants. This is how Gordon, teaming up with local job training manager Sharon Williams, hatched the crazy scheme of opening a different kind of restaurant—a full menu eatery that taught jobless youth how to buy food, cook, serve, bus tables and clean.

Gordon persuaded the designer of the Johnny Rockets chain, a man who took on only a handful of clients a year and charged them big bucks, to design the restaurant as a donation. In the same spirit, Chuck Huggins, the C.E.O. of See's Candy, leased him the building rent free. Gordon was so thankful that he decided to name the restaurant after Huggins' recently deceased wife: Mime's. "It took us nine months, and a lot of serendipity, but we opened," he said, "and we stayed opened."

He was in his mid thirties and could see that every piece of his organization was built upon the piece before it; the structure was likely to stand for years to come and continue to change the direction of many lives. But the fulfillment he derived from his professional life only made what was missing at home more glaring. The vague feeling inside him was no longer so vague. Living on the perimeter of San Francisco, he had to be pathologically detached not to feel the pulsing of another life. And it was this other life he looked upon with growing curiosity.

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I had spent year after year really in agony not knowing what to do. I knew I was gay. I was in my mid 30s, and I had not had a sexual relationship with a man, but I knew that's who I was. I loved my wife, our relationship, but I was not able to truly satisfy her, and I felt guilty about that. It was an impossible place to be."

And so it was that he and his wife found themselves in early 1982 at their weekly "night at the movies," sitting in front of a giant screen



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showing the film "Making Love" about a doctor who is married to a good woman and falls in love with another man and finally realizes his secret. Gordon and his wife watched in silence, perhaps embarrassed, perhaps stunned, because the similarities, including the doctor's love for Gilbert and Sullivan musicals, were downright uncanny. By the end, the doctor had made the painful choice to leave his wife to pursue a more honest life.

"We came out of the movie,

and we drove home and went to bed without ever discussing it," he said. "And that was a first because every movie we ever saw we discussed and dissected."

A week went by, and they were invited to dinner at the house of old friends in Soledad. After dinner, driving home, that long drive back, his wife was at the wheel. She suddenly turned to him.

"When are we ever going to talk about that movie?" she asked.

It had sat in the air for a week, and he wondered what his answer would be. And now it was leaving his mouth. "Probably when I'm ready to come out of the closet," he told her.

"And when will that be?"

"I think I just did it."

He does not recall the car pulling into the driveway, the steps inside, the climb into bed, whether anything else was said. He only remembers that it was all very laboring. How to account for nearly a decade of marriage, and the subject never being broached?

"We both knew for some time. My wife had figured it out. But there was a shyness back then. And I think it was a truth that neither of us wanted to tell. Because in the telling, you completely disrupt your lives and something wonderful we had built. To get to the truth, you had to endure an upheaval."

It took several more months, but they eventually separated their belongings and then their lives. It wasn't bitter. There were no recriminations. They parted friends. Over the next year, as he grieved the loss of his marriage, there was no single coming out. When Gordon informed his boss he was gay, the boss insisted that he share the news with the government leaders with whom they had contracts. The boss suggested that if any of the leaders had problems with Gordon's homosexuality, he'd have to find work

elsewhere. Gordon put on his lucky tie and paid a visit to the police chief, the county probation chief and the county health director. Each one assured him that, gay or not, their working relationship with him would remain unchanged.

Gordon had been out of closet nine months when he hosted a party at his house and became smitten by one of the guests, a Stanford physician named Dennis McShane. He was one of the founders of a national organization for gay doctors called the American Association of Physicians for Human Rights, now known as the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association. AIDS was in its infancy, spreading fast, and McShane was about to open a practice in the suburbs of San Francisco treating HIV patients. It was only as McShane was about to leave the party—and couldn't find his leather coat—that Gordon summoned the nerve to chat with him. Gordon told him he would fetch the coat, but on one condition: he needed McShane's phone number. A few days later, they had their first date.

"He was the first man I ever dated. Asking for his phone number, calling him up, all that was a little outside my comfort zone. But I took my first affirmative steps, and we fell in love. We've been together ever since."

Gordon didn't know it, but he was on the cusp of taking another leap. He had seen the workings of county government close up. He understood as much, if not more, about the gaps in the delivery of social services than any bureaucrat or county chief. And ever since that speech in front of the student body at Costa Mesa High, he knew how giddy it felt to move a crowd toward his vision. As he pondered a plunge into politics, he came to believe that it wasn't so much a jump, after all. But where to start?

The county superintendent of schools happened to be a friend, and

they were talking one day about an insufferable school board member whose intolerance was blocking progress. This was the same board member, a middle-aged female, who had stridently opposed an AIDS education program in the schools—a program Gordon had conceived. Why not run for the school board, his friend suggested.

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Gordon didn't believe his sexuality needed to be preemptively addressed, he was prepared for it to come out as an issue. Already, his opponent had launched a whisper campaign. As endorsements were sought, Gordon and the incumbent found themselves called into the editorial board room of the San Mateo County Times. This was the local paper owned by the conservative Clinton family, whose patriarch, John Hart Clinton, had used its pages to routinely flog gays and the "gay rights" agenda.

The old man had recently died and his son, also John Clinton, also resolutely Republican, presided over the meeting. He, alone, would be making the decision of which candidate to endorse.

"It was a strange experience," Gordon said. "The room was wood paneled, and there was this huge oil painting of the homophobic John Hart Clinton staring down. I'm thinking, 'This is not going to be good,' but I managed to nail every question, and I was really on my mark and striking the right tone. My opponent had fumbled a bit, and I could see that she was getting frustrated. And that's when Clinton said, 'Is there anything else either of you want to say as a closing?'"

Gordon recalls the scene as if it were a screenplay he wrote:

His opponent, the middle-aged lady, was no longer whispering. "Well nobody seems to want to talk about this, but Mr. Gordon is an avowed homosexual. And I just don't know whether that is appropriate or not for the school board."

The publisher seemed taken by surprise. Maybe the rumors hadn't reached him yet. He pushed back his chair from the table, leaned forward and caught Gordon straight in the eye. "Well, what do you have to say?" he said, sternly.

Gordon did his best to reply: "I've been an openly gay man in this community for 10 years. I've been the president of the local Kiwanis Club, and I've chaired the Child Abuse Prevention Council. I've served on several boards and commissions, including the executive committee of the Chamber of Commerce in Redwood City. And I think through all that, I've demonstrated that it doesn't make any difference what my sexual orientation is."

The publisher sat poker faced. "I think that's all we need for today,"

he said. Then he bade goodbye to everyone in the room.

A few weeks later, on the eve of the election, the newspaper shouted its endorsement: “Richard Gordon for School Board.”

The county and its schools were fast changing, with wild shifts in population. Asians, mostly Filipinos, were moving to the north end; Latinos were settling in the south end; Daly City and East Palo Alto were turning into gang turf. Whites were staying put in Atherton and other well-off enclaves as long as their schools performed at a high level and didn’t draw too many “outsiders.”

It took some time for Gordon to learn the jargon of education, convolutions of language that seemed designed to keep parents, especially those of low-income, locked out on the other side of the fence. The whole school reform movement suffered the dynamics of a shell game. Programs came and went, along with hundreds of thousands of dollars in consulting fees, like ice cream flavors of the month. As time went on, he became skilled at unlocking the coded language and strengthening the hand of teachers, breaking down at least some of the walls that separated school districts from the people they served.

“I came away with a strong sense that our schools do too much experimenting in the name of trying to fix things. I took away that the most important ingredient is quality teachers. If you can train them and empower them in the classroom, the best will take off and students will perform better and better. We keep looking for some magic formula, reform for reform sake, when the answer is pretty basic, right there in front of us.”

Even as he won re-election to the school board in 1996, his mind fixed on a seat opening the following spring on the San Mateo County

Board of Supervisors. He lived in unincorporated Menlo Park, and the seat took in the nearby coastal communities from Pacifica to the Santa Cruz boundary. But the election would be countywide, an oddity peculiar to San Mateo County, which meant he had no time to waste to reach so many voters.

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impact President Clinton’s welfare reform would have on the poorer communities of the county. Gordon ended up tallying forty percent of the vote, outdistancing the second place finisher by ten percentage points. Because the incumbent supervisors were split two to two on most votes—two Democrats and two Republicans—his vote would now carry the day.

Working alongside supervisor Jerry Hill (now a state senator representing the 13th District), Gordon pushed to pass a local

initiative that provided health insurance for all children eighteen and under who came from homes where the breadwinners were either not employed or working minimum-wage jobs. On the strength of contributions from local corporations and foundations, San Mateo and Santa Clara became the first counties in the state to fund such programs, covering the health needs of tens of thousands of kids.

Bringing his knowledge of the county budget process to bear, Gordon worked closely with Supervisor Hill to require every agency to come up with a set of performance standards by which to measure their success or failure. It wasn’t enough for a drug and alcohol abuse program to count how many patients it had served in a given year. The agency was now required to measure the effectiveness of that service by quantifying recidivism rates and such.

“We didn’t do this in a top-down way,” Gordon said. “We asked the staff at the ground level to tell us the best way to measure what you do. It was a fascinating process because it evolved over time. The measurements became more and more precise.”

In the fight against sprawl, he had come to conclude that housing tracts and strip malls on farmland and open space did not pay for themselves over the long haul, costing more in public services than they generated in public revenues. The county, at the urging of Gordon and his colleagues, kept to the pledge of not allowing leapfrog growth. Gordon was disheartened to learn that a previous board had designated a pristine piece of the coastline near Half Moon Bay for residential development. The plan called for thirty five houses to be built on the hillside, a bluff that, in Gordon’s view, belonged to everyone. He sat down with the developer and negotiated a deal in which the county

would buy the land and turn it into a park. It exists today as Mirada Surf.

In the thirteen years he served on the board, he figures he devoted more time to making sure the Tom Lantos Tunnel got built than any other issue. Mudslides routinely closed Highway 1 between Pacifica and Half Moon Bay, punctuated by catastrophic road failures at a spot known as Devil's Slide. During one blockage, Caltrans had to close the road from San Francisco to Half Moon Bay for nine months.

Voters had passed a ballot measure to fund the mountain tunnel, but lining up all the agencies to push it through became quite an ordeal, requiring years of meetings organized by Gordon. Completing the tunnel was doubly important because an alternative plan called for a major road bisecting a pristine coastal valley. That valley, thanks to Gordon and others, is now a state park.

"We held monthly meetings for 13 years to get that tunnel built," he said. "It's a mile and a half long, the largest tunnel project in California history."

As a capstone to his board service, in 2008, he was elected president of the California State Association of Counties, the organization's first openly gay leader. During his inaugural speech, on a night he took the reins from then Madera County Supervisor Frank Bigelow, a cattle rancher with an imposing handlebar mustache, Gordon thanked his partner, Denny McShane.

"As a nod to Denny, I had written in my notes that 'I want to thank Denny, my partner, for keeping me centered.' But when the words came out, I said, 'I want to thank Denny, my partner, for keeping me straight.' You should have seen all those rural supervisors with their big belt buckles. They couldn't stop laughing. Several of them came up to me afterward

and said, 'You're alright, after all.' It just shows you that once in a while, a verbal slip can work to your advantage."

Gordon made clear to his supporters that come 2010, at the end of his term, he would retire from politics. But his colleagues at the California State Association of Counties would hear none of it. You have to run for state office, they told him. We need legislators who understand how county governments



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He was vacationing with Denny in the Sierra foothills, two weeks of down time, but couldn't stop groaning about the disconnect between citizens and their elected officials in Sacramento. "At the end of the two weeks, Denny looks over at me and says, 'I just want you to know that you're running for state assembly.' 'Why?' I asked him. 'Because for the last two weeks you've done nothing but complain. If you don't run, you're going to drive me and our three cats crazy.'"

The 21st Assembly District

was an open seat. Incumbent Ira Ruskin was terming out. Two others had announced their candidacies in the Democratic primary: Yoriko Kishimoto, the mayor of Palo Alto, the largest city in the district, and Josh Becker, a venture capitalist who had the means to outspend everyone.

No slouch, Gordon raised more than \$400,000 himself, enough to put a rather audacious plan into effect. Not only would there be no "gay Gordon" whispers, but he was about to send out a mailer to thousands of targeted households. It would show him and Denny, newlyweds, holding hands.

"It was the first time I had done a mailer that bold. But I must tell you that I had no trepidation. I felt things had changed that dramatically in our culture," he said. "My main concern was that half the district was in Santa Clara County, where I had never been on the ballot before. So we put together a very active "get-out-the-vote" effort. And it paid off. It was a tight race, but I won."

In the general election, he faced Greg Conlon, a prominent Bay Area Republican who served on the state Public Utilities Commission. The district's voter makeup—forty two percent registered Democratic, twenty two percent registered Republican—gave Gordon a decided edge. He ran hard and ended up only adding to the margin. Last November, in the redrawn 24th Assembly District, Gordon cruised to re-election, taking seventy percent of the vote against Republican challenger George Yang.

It may be no great surprise to learn that the embrace of voters, the acceptance of a gay legislator's coming out, is not shared by members of his own family. In the case of Gordon, his father did reasonably well with the news, likely figuring that his years of drinking and carousing and womanizing put him in no place to judge a son committed to his one and

only relationship with a man. He not only attended the wedding of Gordon and McShane, but he showed up in good spirits. As for Gordon's mother, she had turned more rigid and conservative in the years after her divorce, choosing never to marry again. Even her politics—she was a fan of Rush Limbaugh—seemed at stubborn odds with her only son. She looked upon her son's marriage to McShane as a last insult and cut him off completely.

A few years ago, as his father lay dying in the wake of another drunken fall, Gordon felt compelled to mend some of the deep family wounds. Each time he visited the nursing home, he could see that his father was refusing to let go, intent on suffering. Because the old man could no longer speak, Gordon was left to wonder why. He decided that his peaceful death would come only if he was able to see his two estranged daughters a last time. Gordon reached out to both of them, urged them to make peace. Margie and Susan agreed.

"I took them to the nursing home, and we walked into my father's room. Even though he couldn't talk, he was able to speak with his eyes. I said to him, 'I've brought your daughters to see you,' and his eyes lit up. It had been more than forty years. I told my sisters, 'If you need a moment to say

something to him,' and I stepped out of the room.... A few days later, he died.

"My hope is that when my mother's time comes, my sisters will return the favor and invite me to say goodbye to her."

Even as he pushes sixty five, Gordon doesn't concede much to age. Each day he rises at five in the morning and heads to the elliptical machine in his den, where he watches episodes of "House of Cards" and "Arrested Development" while typing text messages to his still sleeping staff. As chair of the Assembly Committee on Rules and also the Legislative LGBT Caucus, Gordon churns out more than his share of bills—twenty six of them signed into law during his first term alone.

When he learned that ninety percent of the plastic beverage bottles recycled in California actually took ship to China to be processed back into raw pellets, he pushed for change. As a result of his AB 1149, the state now allocates more funds to its own recycling program to site the entire process here, creating new green jobs.

At the same time, Gordon has led the way in much-needed campaign finance reform, requiring more disclosure of so-called "dark money," funds that benefit candidates and come from sources hidden

under the cover of an "independent expenditure committee."

He recognizes that his district, perhaps more than any other in the state, reflects a new "Gilded Age" when the gap between rich and poor has never been greater. The jobs created by the billionaires of Silicon Valley aren't numerous enough to bail out the regional economy, much less improve the lot of East Palo Alto's poor. At the end of 2013, Gordon is pushing the state to keep its commitment to a program providing subsidized child care for working poor families of San Mateo County.

As Gordon peers into the future, he's not inclined to close off any possibilities. Whether he will pursue higher office or retire gracefully or find another way to carry the torch of the issues he's carried for so long, Gordon isn't closing off any possibilities. When his time to leave the Assembly comes, he says, his path will remain true to form.

"When I look back on my life, from California to Chicago and back again, I can see a straight line across all the personal turmoil. I've never had any children of my own, but much of what I've tried to do has been about the children. In the closet, out of the closet, inside the church, outside the church.... I guess I've never stopped being a minister on the frontlines."