

CALIFORNIA ELECTIONS

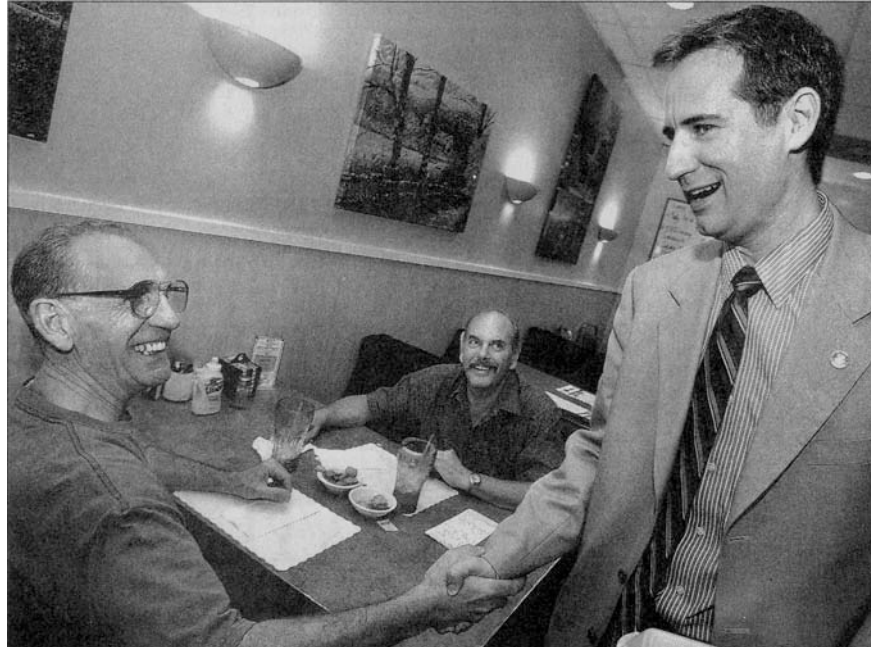
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He's GOP and he's proud

**The only openly
gay Republican
House candidate
feels right at
home in his party**

By Amanda Covarrubias
Times Staff Writer

The 50 men and women of the Northridge Kiwanis Club laughed and clapped when Peter Hankwitz got to the line he often uses at campaign events.



MEET AND GREET: Peter Hankwitz, openly gay Republican challenger to Rep. Brad Sherman in the San Fernando Valley's 27th District, introduces himself to diners at Weiler's Deli in Northridge (Photo: Mel Melcon, *Los Angeles Times*)

"It's so much easier to be openly gay in the Republican Party," Hankwitz said, "than to be a Republican in Hollywood."

He would know. Hankwitz, a television producer, is the only openly gay Republican running for any of the 435 seats in Congress this year. It's his first run for elective office.

In any year, he would be a distinct minority in his party. This election year carries the additional freight of the scandal over Mark Foley, the Republican congressman from Florida who resigned over revelations that he exchanged explicit e-mails with male congressional pages. Foley subsequently announced that he is gay.

According to party officials, Hankwitz, 38, became the sole gay GOP congressional candidate in the midterm elections after Rep. Jim Kolbe of Arizona announced he would not seek another term. Hankwitz is trying to unseat Rep. Brad Sherman (D-Sherman Oaks) in the 27th Congressional District, which stretches from Sunland to Woodland Hills.

Because redistricting gave incumbents a huge advantage — the district's voters are 48% Democratic, 30% Republican — Hankwitz stands little chance of winning. But he does not dwell on his odds, instead talking about returning the GOP to a Barry Goldwater conservatism that emphasizes fiscal over social policy.

"The federal government has no business going into people's homes and bedrooms," Hankwitz said over a club sandwich at Weiler's Deli in Northridge, just a few blocks from the home he shares with Julian Trevino, his domestic partner since 1997.

Although he wears a silver band on his left ring finger, Hankwitz said he and Trevino do not consider themselves married. The ring was simply a birthday present from Trevino.

Hankwitz said he has no particular problem with gay and lesbian couples marrying but believes it is more important that they receive equal protection under the law, a distinction he feels is often lost in the steady push for same-sex marriage.

"It's not an issue of marriage, it's an issue of equal protection under the law," he said. "If we can't refer to ourselves as married, that's all right as long as we're equally protected. I would settle for civil unions or domestic partnerships."

By the same reasoning, he would have voted against the proposed federal marriage amendment, which was supported by the GOP but failed in Congress earlier this year. The proposed amendment to the U.S. Constitution would have denied equal rights under federal law to same-sex couples or domestic partners.

"The bigger picture here is the federal government has no business being involved in social issues," he said.

Tall and slender, with short brown hair, the political novice displays a friendly, easy style and a keen ability to work a room. After finishing his sandwich, Hankwitz stopped by each table to chat and shake hands with diners, who seemed surprised that a candidate was in their midst.

"These nice-looking young women want to meet you," a waitress said, pointing to two tables he missed. He shook the women's hands and gave them his business card.

Hankwitz said that he is not bothered when people assume he is straight and that being gay is seldom an issue on the campaign trail. Of the hundreds of e-mails he has received, he said just four have been hate mail.

"The only ones who bring it up are gay Democrats who have a problem with the fact that I'm a Republican," he said, adding that those writers have accused him of being the equivalent of a black KKK member or a Jewish Nazi.

Hankwitz said he likes to introduce himself to groups as a gay candidate.

"I want to make sure that there's never an appearance I'm hiding anything, so people know who they're dealing with," he said. "It's a matter of fact, and it's information of interest to some people."

Outside the deli, Hankwitz approached a man who described himself as a communist and said President Bush and the Republican Party were "butchers" for their roles in the Iraq war. "I advise you to get out of the Republican Party," the man told him. "At least become a Democrat."

Hankwitz nodded and thanked him for sharing. Then he turned and rolled his eyes.

In fact, Hankwitz used to be a Democrat but switched parties in the late 1990s after listening to conservative talk radio host Dennis Prager.

"It was something he said," Hankwitz said. "I don't remember exactly what it was, but for the first time I thought, 'Now I understand what Republicans really are about, that they care and they're inclusive.' I was so proud to have gotten it."

Hankwitz said what he likes about the GOP are its principles of "individual responsibility."

"Folks who claim to be family values-oriented are reflecting values that perhaps are not my and my family's values," he said. "Mine are limited government, free trade, a strong national defense.... If we as Americans support those issues, then we're more lined up with Republican values than Democratic values."

The fringe right, the religious right has hijacked the name and brand and redefined the party as anti-gay and anti-abortion."

After 20 years in Hollywood, first as a talent manager, now as the owner of a small production company, Hankwitz said people in the entertainment industry often join the Democratic ranks because of peer pressure. Many Republicans in Hollywood, both gay and straight, are too fearful of being shunned or criticized by the liberal majority to admit it, he said.

As for the GOP, Hankwitz said National Republican Congressional Committee officials have told his campaign manager they support his candidacy, but they have not forwarded any cash. The national Log Cabin Republicans, the gay Republican organization, recently contributed \$500. Christine Todd Whitman's centrist Republican organization, It's My Party Too, also has endorsed him.

Even if he loses, he said his candidacy will have served an important purpose by pressing the GOP toward the center.

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