YouSpeak Radio Episode 2 – “Be Who You Are” with Councilmember Mike Bonin

Audio Transcript

Youspeak Introduction:

This is Youspeak Radio. With generous support from the Dwight Stuart Youth Fund. A project by ONE Archives Foundation on Tongva Land.

[MUSIC]

Caleigh Campbell:
Throughout his career as a Los Angeles city councilman and political organizer, Mike Bonin has demonstrated the distinct value he places on queer community and solidarity among marginalized people. During this inspiring conversation, Mike discusses the vitality of the LGBTQ+ community in the face of adversity, such as California's Proposition 8 in 2008, which banned same sex marriage by popular vote. Mike, the founder of Camp Courage, has orchestrated and witnessed queer hope and togetherness through political advocacy.

Mike Bonin:
Solidarity and coalitions are really important. Whatever struggles I was facing or whatever discrimination I was facing, uh, someone else who might not be gay or lesbian, who might be, uh, you know, from Central America, or who might be a woman or who might be African-American or might be a worker who is not represented in the workplace. All of these struggles are linked, and it's important for us to be there for each other and with each other so that we advance together.

Caleigh:
Mike brings light and hope to my outlook as a young social advocate by noting the strength of intersectional support in politics. The intergenerational connections that was provided from this program have felt truly invaluable to my growth and experience as a young LGBTQ person. I've gained a sense of queer community that transcends location or identity, and this feeling motivates me to continue my path to a career in law with a focus on progressive social change
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[MUSIC]

Caleigh:
I'm Caleigh Campbell. My pronouns are she/her, and I am a 17 year old going to my senior year in Memphis, Tennessee. I'm very interested in pursuing a path in politics, um, majoring in political science.

Mike:
I am Mike Bonin. I am 56, and I am in my first year being out of office after serving on the Los Angeles City Council, uh, as one of the city's few openly-LGBTQ+ elected officials from 2013 through 2022. And prior to that I was a government staffer, community organizer around a number of progressive issues, including for a very long time Marriage Equality here in California. And relevantly, I am married for almost ten years and uh, uh, a father. My husband and I are father to an amazing, incredible nine year old.

Caleigh:
Growing up in not actually Memphis, but the suburbs, about an hour and a half away, I have some relation to what it feels like to grow up in a small town, Christian area. After growing up gay in a small, Christian town, how did your experiences there lead you to a path of public policy?

Mike:
I grew up in the late seventies, early eighties, in a small, ethnic, Catholic, culturally-conservative town, 11,000 people in central Massachusetts. You know, the Catholic Church doesn't have the greatest track record in the world, to put it mildly, on on on gay issues. And, um, growing up, you know, it's different than today. You know, when I was growing up there, there were no LGBTQ+ celebrities. There were no reflections of who I was or who I was struggling to identify myself as being in, in media, in books, anywhere. I mean, it was very, very, very isolating. I remember when I was in high school, you know, Reagan had just taken office. There was an organization called the Moral Majority. It was Jerry Falwell. And, you know, they were trying to make society more conservative.

NBC at the time had a sitcom that they started that year with Tony Randall and Swoosie Kurtz called Love Sidney. The premise of it was that Tony Randall was was gay, but his partner or his husband had died. The backlash even before the show aired, was huge, and so they retrenched. And the only reference to Sidney's dead partner was there was a photo of him on the mantel over the fireplace on the show. There was never any reference to it. And I remember, you know, as a 12 or 13 year old being very excited that, "Oh, my God, there's going to be a gay character on television." And then seeing what the backlash was to it, so it was it was very, very isolating.

[MUSIC]

Mike:
Only when I went to college did I start coming out, but I was still struggling with it. And it was still sort of an isolating experience. And where where I really found acceptance, where it really found family was in, um, a lot of the political issues I got involved with on campus.

We didn't use the term progressive back in in the late eighties. It wasn't in vogue yet, but I got involved in a lot of progressive issues. I did stuff with the ACLU to get organizations to divest from South Africa. I worked on congressional campaigns. I worked on a union drive for clerical and technical workers. It was the beginning of what was then called the Pink Collar movement. It was about organizing workplaces that were, um, more white collar, but predominantly female. And, that was an incredibly welcoming environment. There were, you know, a number of of of lesbians or a couple of gay guys who were in the organizing drive. And it just it gave me a sense of of sort of belonging a bit. And it began to teach me that, um, solidarity and coalitions are really very, very important, uh, that, um, whatever struggles I was facing or whatever discrimination I was facing, uh, someone else who might not be gay or lesbian, who might be, you know, from Central America, or who might be a woman or who might be African-American or might be a worker who is not represented in the workplace. All of these struggles are linked, and it's important for us to be there for each other and with each other so that we advance together.

It was the solidarity of, you know, what Dr. King would have called “beloved community” that helped bring me out of the isolation of of growing up gay in a very small and and conservative town.

Caleigh:
That's good to hear about the community that you're able to find in politics and college. Speaking more on like the intersectionality of those movements, I want to hear more about how in those grassroots organizations that you worked on how you saw LGBTQ and more intersectional activism spread through L.A., that community and beyond with Camp Courage.

Mike:
I mean I remember in in college watching *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, which was a about an hour and a half long documentary that came out, uh, you know, probably in the mid eighties.

And then that got me to to read, you know, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, which was the is it the defining biography of Harvey Milk by Randy Schulz. The way that that Harvey got elected in San Francisco was intersectionality and coalition-building. Right? I mean his campaign manager, Anne Kronenberg, was a lesbian, and this was in the late seventies before gays and lesbians really were as united. I mean, there's still big differences today, but they were much more, more

united today politically than they were then. He made alliances with the Asian-American community in San Francisco, and he actually made alliances with organized labor. He worked with, I believe it was the Teamsters, and they were boycotting Coors Beer because they couldn't organize or they weren't unionized. And Harvey helped get Coors beer out of all the gay bars in San Francisco, and so that formed an alliance that ultimately helped get Harvey elected.

[MUSIC]

Mike:
When I got to Los Angeles, you know, Los Angeles is a place with a a really strong history of of coalition politics and of of of solidarity in the in the nineties, which was when I first got here, I was just sort of a young, green staffer, Sheila Kuehl, who's a very good friend of mine now was the first LGBTQ member elected to the California state legislature. And when she joined the legislature, she was just her right. Eventually, there were four, all lesbians. Great documentary about the four of them called *Political Animals*. Antonio Villaraigosa, who later became speaker of the Assembly and later became Mayor of Los Angeles. He said he formed with her a gay and lesbian caucus because he didn't want her to be alone.

When there were big fights over LGBT issues, another future speaker of the Assembly, who I served with on the L.A. City Council, Herb Wesson, got up and spoke on the issue and said, "Sheila, this isn't just your fight. This is my fight, too."

Caleigh:
What most surprised me was the community that is found and how even in this professional environment there will be gay people, there will be trans people, and that we are everywhere. And the spirit of support that exists not just in the LGBTQ community, but all these other communities.

[MUSIC]

Mike:
When Prop 8 was on the ballot, now we're fast forwarding, you know, ten years, 2008, one of the the organizations that was most aggressively in the forefront standing with the LGBT community was Unite HERE, which is a union of predominantly Latino, very low income workers, who work in hotels and restaurants.

I had always been very close with this union myself. I did a lot of work as a staffer and then later as an elected official. But it was an example of of of people in common struggle being there for one another. And there was a a a real strong labor component to the fight against Proposition 8. Prominent African-American civic leaders were were there and religious leaders were there

helping in that fight. A huge proponent for four decades of gay rights, Dolores Huerta from the United Farm Workers, she has been there for the beginning.

There was something ingrained in Los Angeles, because it's a city so big and so diverse where so many people have been shut out of power or have been disenfranchized that that that sort of built up.
But the the campaign against Proposition 8, the organized campaign and all the the main LGBT nonprofits, uh, and the gay and lesbian centers sort of ran the campaign. And to be honest, they ran a pretty shitty campaign. It wasn't very human. It was, um, it didn't talk about personal stories. Right. It talked about abstract things like “rights” and “fairness.”

They almost shied away from using the term gay or lesbian in their advertising. And one of the criticisms of that ,which ultimately lost right, we lost at the ballot box was that the organizations were out of touch.

One of the ways they were out of touch is that it was predominantly upper middle income, cis white guys who were running these organizations, not exclusively, but predominantly.

When Prop 8 passed, I had been working on the Obama campaign, and I wasn't working on the fight against Prop 8 except peripherally. And, the night Obama won, huge moment. I was there with all of my teammates. It was this huge moment, everybody celebrating and like they're crying with joy. And I'm looking at my BlackBerry, and I'm looking to see that my civil rights had just been taken away. And I was like, "All right, I got to step up on this, alright?"

I happened to talk a few days later at an Obama, alumni thing with, um, a guy named Rick Jacobs, who co-founded and ran a group called, uh, The Courage Campaign in California, and with my friend Terry Osborne, who used to run the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and who ran the Gay and Lesbian Center in California, and who is one of the greatest apostles of all about the importance of coalition-building. Right, I mean, she's a powerful feminist leader, a powerful gay and lesbian leader. She's always been there for other communities. She's a progressive weaver, really, in California. And we were talking about why don't we do the kind of community-building training for Marriage Equality that that Obama did for his team.

We would go to these two day camps, Camp Obama, modeled after what the United Farm Workers had done, uh, um, where it's about story of self. It's about telling personal stories. It's about telling the story of a, of a challenge you face, a choice you made and what the outcome was. And it's a very powerful personal organizing tool. And we, um, went around the state of California doing these trainings, and we did one in D.C. at the national March in October of 2010.

Prop 8 had passed. Everybody was pissed. All of a sudden, new, new grassroots activists emerged gay, straight, young people who had not been engaged. And all of these groups started springing up, Unite the Fight, White Knot, Roots of Equality, Equal Roots, Latino Equality Alliance, API Equality. I mean, so many groups. And it was really, really diverse. It was exactly the opposite of what had happened in the Prop 8 campaign.
Following this moment of of of terrible defeat was this spirit of of solidarity and optimism and and kind of joy of beloved community. It was this amazing, amazing moment. And those are the people who became a lot of the trainers of Camp Courage. And we did the first one in West Hollywood, which was, you know, predictable enough. It was a day after a big statewide summit on what the hell had gone wrong.

Immediately we knew we had to do things differently. And there had been so many people who had been forgotten by the campaign, right, Black, Latino, and people in red communities like in in the Central Valley of California. And there was a big effort by people in the central part of the state who felt abandoned by the campaign. Isolated. You know, here they are, gay, lesbian, bi, transgender, lonely in a very conservative area. So we took the second camp we did was in Fresno, California, which was unprecedented. Fresno has not had a big gay event before, right? They have not had 400 gay people descend upon them. And it was hugely impactful. Dolores Huerta came to speak at that. Hugely impactful, not just for the people who attended, but the people who came to train. And it was it was eye opening for us to see how people in non-urban areas were were struggling and all sorts of ties were built.

And from it, there came a big event, in in a few months later in June of that year called "Meet in the Middle." Where the LGBT community from Northern California and San Francisco and Oakland and Southern California, San Diego, Los Angeles, we literally went back to Fresno, and we met in the middle for a huge gay pride demonstration calling for Marriage Equality. It was enormous, and I don't think it's been remembered enough in in, in in history.

Then we started doing the camps and other places. We did a camp in Oakland, California. We did a camp in East L.A., which is, you know, the Latino, historically Latino section of Los Angeles. Each of those camps had to be done differently, like when we went into East L.A., folks are like, "Hey, you're coming to our community. You don't understand this culture. You need to listen to us. You need to learn from us." And so we we partnered with them and so they co-trained with us. And I, um, can still remember how powerful the East L.A. one was. Right, this was a community, primarily Latino community and Catholic, mainly, right, immigrant, conservative, Catholic, which resonated with me.

There was a lot of struggle, even with their own families, about coming out or getting their own families to support. And they didn't want us to go right back to the ballot because they thought more work needed to be done in their communities, and they didn't want to be scapegoated for

the loss because a lot of people blame the Latino community for the lost. And this two day training was so amazing.

There are two stories I still remember. Stella and Alma. There was a a young Asian-American lesbian organizer who, uh, came to this, and she brought her mother, who was older, obviously more conservative.

By the end of it, her mother got up, Stella, and gave an amazing, powerful speech about how she loved her daughter and how she wanted her daughter to have the freedom to love and be loved and how she was dedicated to organizing for marriage equality. The crowd went nuts. Um, and then Alma got up. She's from an immigrant family, from, I believe El Salvador, and she got up with her sister. And her sister, uh, talked about, um, how moved she was and how she was going to be there for her sister. And it just it showed the power of of of personal stories and of love and of solidarity.

It it was just incredible because it wasn't just about stories, it was also about community organizing. It was how to go talk to your neighbors, how to organize with the idea that we were eventually going to go back to the ballot. And of course, at the same time, there was a parallel legal strategy, uh, that ultimately got things done prior to us going to a ballot. But, uh, it was incredible.

[MUSIC]

Caleigh:
It was really great to hear about the how the LGBTQ community came together in these, well, for me, historical, because I'm I was like ten at the time, but how, um, they came together to fight for marriage equality and the things our community needed in times that, like, really overlap with what's happening today with all of the anti-LGBT bills coming out.

So there's a bit of hope to see that there is a community that is able to work in politics to do that, whether it be on the higher scale of as elected officials or whether it be grassroots. I wanted to ask about how being one of like I think three or very few LGBTQ elected officials in Los Angeles. How did your queer experience interact with your roles? in like, Was there any crossover in your identity into your work, and what did that look like for you?

Mike:
So three doesn't sound like a lot, but it actually is because we have a very small city council. There's only. For the city of Los Angeles, there's only 18 elected officials. There were two council members, the first time there were two openly-gay council members, and then our city controller elected citywide first time was a gay man, um, you know, all of them were were were

white in their forties and fifties uh since. So, I mean it wasn't the most diverse representation of the gay community in the world.

I've been in Los Angeles politics long enough to, uh, remember when there was a member of the council who felt like he needed to stay closeted in the nineties. Uh, I remember when it was a big deal when a member of the council identified as a lesbian when she was running for council in the nineties. I remember when there were no LGBT members of the council. And then I managed to race for my predecessor, who was gay, uh, in 2005 and it was not a huge issue, but it was a little bit of an issue. Like we both represented a very liberal part of town, um, but there was still a little bit of a whisper campaign at the beginning among some people, but it dissipated. When I ran, it like wasn't an issue at all.

It was something that probably helped politically. Um, you know, and I was of a different political profile than the other two gay elected officials. we had a lot in common, you know, on paper in terms of age and demographics and stuff, but I was much more aggressively progressive and dedicated to to the idea of coalition building.

I really did a lot of work on on civil rights issues and equity issues, regardless of who was involved. If I ever want to ask for something, I damn well better have been there for you when when you needed something.

I remember just having a Gay and Lesbian Heritage Month in Los Angeles is a fairly new thing. My predecessor started it, and it got to be a bigger deal every year. And, we had this big celebration in council, um, a few years ago and five or six years ago. And I remember speaking at that and talking about how important it is because with the exception of groups like ONE Archives. The gay and lesbian community doesn't pass down history the same way.

You know, contrast with the Jewish community, right, I mean every year, high holidays, they tell stories, right? They they they literally pass on heritage and tradition. But you can grow up as a as a gay or lesbian or a queer kid and not have anybody in your family who is, right? And so you're not inheriting the same things. We have to create different ways of passing on and and sharing and celebrating our history.

I was pretty successful in why it was important for the gay community to be there on other issues and why it was important for other people to be there on our issues. And I remember talking about, you know, the the the same people who are trying to take away women's reproductive freedom are the same people who are opposing marriage equality, the same people who want to, you know, change the curriculum in schools are the same people who are, you know, objecting to gun control or the same people who are trying to take away voting rights are the same people who are, you know, fighting immigration reform.

Some of the faces may maybe a little different, but it's a pretty freakin common enemy and even more stark now than it was then.

[MUSIC]

Mike:
Because you sort of asked about the council dynamics, my last couple of months in office were pretty brutal. In October of last year, these horrible tapes were released, um, that were racist and homophobic, and my family, me and my son, were really the most celebrated targets of it. Um, it wasn't the most systematically racist part of the conversation, but it was most outrageously part of the conversation.

When I first heard the tapes, my immediate thought was for my son. My focus was on the racism on the tapes, the things they called my son and the way they were conspiring against the Black community. Because I was very determined, this isn't just about my son. This is about all of the racism that he and every other little black kid in Los Angeles is going to face,

Even I missed for the first day sort of the homophobia that was inherent in the tapes, that they were sort of challenging the legitimacy of my family, that, you know, they referred to me as a "little bitch," that they referred to Mitch O'Farrell, the other gay member, as a "diva," right?

I was so offended by the stuff about my son, I'd even catch the stuff about me.

I learned that people who act like allies that I had been there for on so many issues aren't always there.

It was very disheartening to sort of see the reality of the ugliness in in people's hearts.

Not to leave this question on the sour note is whether it was about the the racism, whether it was about the homophobia, whether it was, um, about the sort of delegitimizing of adoptive families. For all the hate I heard on those tapes, I saw and heard and experienced so much love and warmth from the rest of Los Angeles and far beyond Los Angeles that it it more than compensated. Um, um, and it showed me that, okay, these were three assholes I worked with who aren't representative of what Los Angeles really is.

Caleigh:
Whether you are young and black, young and gay, young and trans, that for all the hate that there is and that people spew, there is this much love and that just shows how that, even though

something horrible and awful happened to your family, that there's still that love behind that. I'm glad to hear that there is the good side to something so horrifying.

I wanted to talk to you about your personal experiences with mental health, and about your homelessness legislation and how your personal experiences changed or fueled your perspectives and motivations, particularly in the homeless population.

Mike:
When I got elected, it was a time, much different time in Los Angeles where we were coming out of the recession, things, everybody seemed happy it was an era of good feeling.

The problems that we're facing weren't as visible or as demanding, and, I very much shifted over my time in office. I got more aggressively progressive. I became much more of a political maverick and troublemaker, tipped over, you know, a few apple carts

I decided if I had an opportunity to do this job, I had to be true to my values, and I had to be true to what I had lived and what I had understood.

In talking about homelessness, my experience has almost nothing in common with the experience of people who are living in encampments. They've been there for years. It's horrible.

It was much different. You know, I was young, new to California, was struggling with a new environment, was doing a lot of drugs. And I spent a few nights on the streets, a few nights in my car, a few nights, you know, in fleabag motels and stuff like that. So it's certainly not a direct comparison to what's happening now, but it gave me a couple of perspectives. One, it gave me a a really visceral memory of what it's like when the sun goes down and you don't know where you're going to sleep. Right. Whether that happens to you for one night or for three years, you remember that.

And that was not a voice or a perspective that I was hearing in council chambers or in city government. I really felt a responsibility to start saying things that weren't being said and speaking voices that weren't being spoken in council chambers. So more and more I gravitated towards that and became, particularly in my second term, a leader in in fights against criminalization of of homelessness.

The experience of of struggling with homelessness and housing instability is that and other things have taught me that we all fall down, we all break, we are all fragile. For me, there's something really special and and kind of holy in those places where we're broken because when we heal, it gets stronger. And those are the things that are the most real and vulnerable about us.

Having fallen and having people help me back up, I really believe that we have an obligation to help everybody back up. That's just a sort of core belief I have. Another big belief I have is, you know, I've been 28 years sober now, clean and sober from alcohol and coke and crystal meth thanks to 12-step fellowships and spirituality and a number of other things. And that has given me a very deep and abiding belief that people have a tremendous capacity for change. And that big change that a lot of people say is just not possible is possible. I have seen it. I have seen, you know, thieves and felons become the best dads in the world that are my role models.

The other two core lessons for me that steered my public service is becoming a dad. Uh, you know, I became a dad late in life. I was 46 or 47 when when we got Jacob, and, it made me think of the long game, right?

What does the city need to look like in 20 years? What are the the big challenges we're facing, and how do we change the arc of stuff, um, particularly on climate change? I mean, it just made me rabid on climate change and it made me rabid, because my child is black, it made me rabid on on police violence. I mean, I just I became, you know, a mama bear. The fourth thing is about mortality. You know, um, my sister died young from cancer about 12 years ago, a couple of years before I ran for office. My predecessor didn't run for a third term because he got cancer, and he died shortly after I took office. Um, three different elected officials who have represented my part of the city at different levels of government, died from cancer when they were young and in office. I've lost a couple of friends to cancer.

It gave me an incredible sense of impatience that a very strong sense that all we have is today. This, you know, I something could happen to me and I may not have the chance to make a difference tomorrow, so I'm going to try to make a difference today. And, you know, that impatience got me in trouble.

But, I was able to look myself in the mirror when I came home at night. So I'm happy with it.

[MUSIC]

Caleigh:
We've spoken a lot on hope and community, and in the face of all the legislation coming out in the recent year and a half especially especially towards trans people, what is a piece of like your biggest advice for young LGBTQ people in the face of these political challenges?

Mike:
Be you. Just be you. Don't be afraid of who you are. You have the right to be who you are.

You are beautiful. And you deserve, uh, to be loved. And you deserve to be empowered. And

you deserve to be celebrated. And you deserve to be happy. I think the times we are in are so brutal, but the the young people today who have the courage to declare who they are and own who they are at an age for which, for me, it was absolutely unimaginable. Those people are so inspiring.

One of the iconic figures of the modern Civil Rights Movement is Ruby Bridges, this young girl who walked through a a a daily phalanx of ugly, racist people shouting at her and spitting at her at at unbelievably young age. She walked through that and went to school.

We're all called to be Ruby Bridges right now. To just be who we are. Walk where we have a right to walk. Endure it. Survive it and thrive. I see so many so many Ruby Bridges out there in the LGBTQ community. I see them in all sorts of communities. I see them in, you know, the gun control community. I see them in the Sunrise Movement. I see them in the the incredible, amazing young African-American legislators in your state. I see them in the the leaders of the trans community who are just sort of fighting the worst of everything. I just see so much courage and so much strength.

It's hard not to be dispirited by what's happening, but it's really hard not to be inspired by what I'm seeing in response to it.

Caleigh:
It's just so inspiring and movement, moving to see the way that this queer community connects throughout wherever you are and how the joy and the life of the LGBTQ community transcends.

Thank you of, for your time and your guidance and all that you had to share. That was really special to hear.

Mike:
Please, keep me updated on what you're doing. I'd like to know when you run for office. Thanks, everybody.

Youspeak Outro (32:10):

This is Youspeak Radio. We are Caleigh Campbell, Diego Gonzalez, Madeline Lee, Grae Mordhorst, Elliot Starr-Schneider, Marbella Zoliz-Maldonado with generous support from the Dwight Stuart Youth Fund, a project by ONE Archives Foundation on Tongva Land.