Scholar Spotlight: Todd Gloria

In the late 1990s, when Todd Gloria was easing into his stint attending the University of San Diego, he was hard-pressed to envision himself operating as an effective activist--or any sort of public servant, really.

To hear him tell it, he had his hands full enough just grappling with some fundamental challenges of functioning as a student at the private Catholic university.

“Being poor, being brown, and being gay were kind of tough things to be on that campus,” Gloria told me in an interview on Oct. 12.

College students facing struggles finding their way during their first year or two is hardly an uncommon scenario, though Gloria’s obstacles may have loomed larger.

Still, as his undergrad career unfolded, he clearly found his footing, including being selected a Strauss Scholar in 1999, executing a project on the USD campus entitled “Gay Awareness and Understanding.”

That experience, he says, galvanized him as an activist, placing him on a path of public service that’s since included holding a seat on the San Diego City Council, serving eight months as mayor of that city (eighth largest in the U.S.), and less than two years ago, Gloria started working as a California State Assemblyman, who at last count, has authored and helped pass 26 pieces of legislation.

Not bad as personal journeys go, and Gloria, 40, seems a bit nonplussed himself when examining just how far he’s traveled. “If you’d have told me 20 years ago, when we did [the Strauss project], that all this would even be possible, I would’ve just laughed at you,” he said.

There’s surely some humility at play there—his 20-year arc has been marked by a burning ambition, keen intelligence, and an increasingly honed passion to help assorted disenfranchised folks—but Gloria also describes a campus environment two decades ago that wasn’t supportive of LGBTQ+ issues, and allows that he didn’t exactly arrive at USD as a fully-formed crusader.

Early in our conversation, he marveled that we happened to be talking on the day when, later, he’d drive over “to USD to dedicate their first ever LGBT student resource center”: the LGBTQ+ & Allies Student Common.

There’s been a lot of evolving going on, much of which he traces back to his Strauss experience. Recognizing that he’s speaking with a Strauss *about* the Strauss (and perhaps reflecting that he’s become a seasoned politician), he prefaces his comments with “not to blow smoke or anything….”

Then, he continues expounding on what he, and the campus, were like back then, and the changes that ensued.

“Forgive me if I perhaps get a little too esoteric, but there’s a concept in the LGBT community called the ‘Best Little Boy In The World Syndrome.’ The idea being that, if you are seen as having this sort of inherent flaw, to the extent people perceive it that way, what you try to do is excel in everything else, and be perfect in every other regard—so it minimizes the other flaw, right?

“The reason I bring that up is because I was the nerdy kid you suspect: Straight A’s,

involved in everything, student body president, all that kind of stuff. Really, a symptom of ‘Best Little Boy In The World Syndrome’ is that you try to be as inoffensive as possible, because you have this thing about you that so many do find so very offensive, right?

“What was important about the project was that I was on this campus, I was feeling extremely uncomfortable, and I wanted to make a change. And I have leadership skills that develop in people from student government or other things I was involved in that really taught me leadership skills.

“But also really turning that around and engaging in a subject matter that was difficult, things that might make other people uncomfortable, things that might get out me out of the shell of this ‘Best Little Boy In The World,’ was really important because when you look at what I do today, it’s very much the same thing.

“I like to say that I found my voice as an activist on the campus at USD, and that may have been about diversity, inclusion, LGBT rights. But once I left campus, I became a housing activist, and there’s a direct line from that to where I’m at today, in terms of being a neighborhood-level activist to someone who’s served or was appointed to the city’s housing commission to a city council member, to now a state legislator.

Swinging back around to the personal impact of carrying out his Strauss project, he added “I just really feel like that experience that I had at USD was pretty formative for helping me get out of a shell that I was in, to really be able to find a way to talk about difficult subjects in a way that was inclusive and actually created progress. And, those are skills that, again, I use every single day today. So, I’ll say that the extent that it shaped my professional path, it’s a lot. “

Gloria is quick to acknowledge others’ contributions and broadly share credit, whether it’s pointing out that his activism on the University of San Diego campus, in executing his Strauss project or otherwise, prompted some faculty members to encourage him to apply for Truman Scholarship—which he received, moving to Washington, D.C., where he gained invaluable experience working for Hillary Clinton and Congresswoman Susan Davis—or that he worked in concert with many others to affect change on the USD campus.

Summarizing, he said, “I absolutely think that the exposure that I had because of what Strauss allowed me to do in terms of pursuing some of the time that I otherwise would have spent at a minimum-wage job or something like that.

“Working and kind of agitating on campus got me the attention of the faculty that led me to then sponsoring my application to Truman, which got me the job at the federal level, which got me the next job at the federal level, and here we are as sort of a series of dominoes.”

Since being sworn in as California State Assembly member for the 78th district in December of 2016, Gloria has emerged as a highly productive, prolific lawmaker, directly responsible for nearly 30 pieces of legislation.

When asked to cite two or three bills he’s authored of which he’s most proud, it’s unsurprising that Gloria instantly mentions housing.

“My personal passion is housing. It’s a subject matter that animates me. If I wasn’t in elected office, I’d like to think that I’d be working somewhere in that space, trying to help people to afford to live in this community,” he said, noting the one he’s proudest of (AB 20372) was recently signed by Governor Brown, and provides developers incentives to build affordable housing for the middle class.

Another of the bills he singled out deals with Native American Repatriation (“I’m the legislature’s only Native American serving”), building upon a 1990 federal law demanding that cultural institutions return artifacts and human remains collected over hundreds of years, forcing The University of California system to expedite its efforts in doing so, while the third bill Gloria highlighted is a nationally-innovative law that helps ensure that transgender children in the foster care system receive medically appropriate treatment for their gender.

Again, this represents just a fraction of the legislation he’s helped pass. He’s working enormously hard. Indeed, it’s apparent from speaking with Gloria that he maintains a pretty grueling schedule.

When I inquire about hobbies and outside interests, there’s a long pause. “Well,” he finally answers, “I became an uncle three years ago—and it has been fantastic.”

His niece is Helena. “Obviously, she’s not my direct child, but she informs my public service, right? When I’m working on climate change issues, I’m doing it with her in mind. So, I don’t get a whole lot of spare time, but I try to spend as much time as I can with her. She’s pretty spectacular.”

Helena hang time is hard to come by, but before he launched this phase of his career, he was cautioned about the rigors of the job. “I went to my old boss and told her ‘Hey, I think I’m going to run for office.’ She was extremely supportive, she’s so

wonderful, but I never forgot these words: She said ‘It’s not an occupation, it’s a lifestyle.’

“I thought I understood what she meant when she said that, but I didn’t. Now I do. But that’s okay, right? I choose to do this, I’m delighted to do it, I love what I get to do. But yeah, it doesn’t leave for a lot of nights at home with your feet up, or weekends just lounging. “

--DUNCAN STRAUSS