McGreevey: Resignation 'a blessing'

TRENTON—Gov. James E. McGreevey's announcement 10 years ago that he was a "gay American" and would resign as governor has been described a lot of ways — shocking, regrettable, inevitable, a cover story.

To McGreevey, the events of Aug. 12, 2004, are "actually, a blessing."

"It's sort of understanding and hopefully having an awareness of the significance of that decision, what it meant in people's lives both personally and professionally," McGreevey said.

In the 10 years since then, McGreevey has written a book, weathered a rough divorce proceeding, studied to become an Episcopalian priest and worked to help former prisoners successfully transition back into society.

"In many respects, I'm much closer to the values with which I was raised. I'm much closer to the ground in a better, healthier and I think more fulfilled place," McGreevey said.

Ben Dworkin, director of the Rebovich Institute for New Jersey Politics at Rider University, said McGreevey's resignation and "gay American speech" made the shift that has taken place in Americans' increasing acceptance of gay rights over the last 10 years easier.

"If you want to see social change, you just look at how America has shifted in its opinion and treatment of gay and lesbians. Jim McGreevey's acknowledgment, I think, helped push that process forward," Dworkin said.

McGreevey dismissed the idea.

"I wouldn't be so presumptuous," McGreevey said. "I think it's one person's experience."

John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, said the announcement had little impact on the LGBT movement.

"I don't think that changed public attitudes about homosexuality, but it's interesting how different they are now than they were then," Weingart said. "That was never the whole reason for him resigning, but it got perceived as that, and I don't think that would be the leading explanation today."

"The real issue was putting somebody unqualified on the payroll for the reasons he did," Weingart said. "While the headlines and the lead of McGreevey's obituary will be about being gay, even then that didn't necessitate he resign to the same extent at least that the Golan Cipel hiring did."

Cipel was the lover McGreevey put on the state payroll.

McGreevey said the difference between how gays are viewed in 2014 versus 2004 is "light years, remarkable" — but he said that even if he were in politics now, he probably wouldn't have been open about his sexuality, which he said he had been trying to deny or change since age 7.

"I made a basic decision sort of in my adolescent years that I would never be able to embrace who and what I was," he said. "It was largely a decision that I never significantly revisited, particularly in politics, because there was little measure in coming out of the closet and proclaiming one's sexuality. It would have been a political death knell."

McGreevey now directs the nonprofit Jersey City Employment & Training Program, which is affiliated with the city government. It works with ex-offenders, emphasizing sobriety, structured housing and work in a regimented program that aims to reduce recidivism.

"Our program is dramatically different from what typically happens behind bars," McGreevey said. "What typically happens behind bars is that people frankly lay around all day and do nothing, which actually drives me nuts, because it's just a matter of acquiescing to the lowest common denominator. Our program is about expectations."

Harrison said McGreevey's post-resignation work also should be part of an assessment of him.
"Here's a guy who has managed to create a legacy outside of office, which is really rather significant in terms of his work in prisons and working with the current administration on all kinds of legislation. We've seen other governors kind of fade into the background as kind of elder statesmen. Of course, he was much younger than say a Jim Florio or Christie Todd Whitman," Harrison said.

"But I think that one of the things about McGreevey is in some ways he can almost be compared with President (Jimmy) Carter, that his post-governor work really has been rather significant," she said. "I think a lot of people admire and respect him for that, that he was able to create a new life not just in a personal way but in a new professional way that makes a difference in the state."

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