On his penultimate day at San Francisco's KPIX-TV, political editor Hank Plante pointed a visitor to his desk, which almost sagged beneath old press credentials, videotapes, photographs (one showed him questioning Barack Obama) and personal notes. As Plante made his way closer to his cubicle, a nearby reporter, Mike Sugerman, saw him and bellowed, "Oh, he's still here?!"

Plante looked at Sugerman and laughed. Sugerman laughed, too. For weeks, KPIX staffers had known Plante was retiring from the station that had been his working home since 1986. Tributes were being prepared that would spotlight Plante's noteworthy interviews (Obama, Richard Nixon, George Bush), national honors (a George Foster Peabody Award tops the list), and longevity in the business (he started his journalism career at the Washington Post at the same time as Bob Woodward), but on this day, the 63-year-old Plante was showing a side of himself that rarely appeared on TV: his sense of humor.

For a visitor, Plante discussed another side of his life that viewers may have been unaware of: his openness as a gay man. Plante says his sexual orientation made him a better reporter because he avoided stereotyping his subjects, knowing how easy it is to reduce people to cliched descriptions.

During some of his exclusive sit-down interviews with politicians, Plante would mention his domestic partner, Roger Groth. The remark, Plante says, would put the politicos at ease by "creating a space of openness."

But Plante was unafraid to be combative, as when he sat next to Dick Cheney on a plane trip during the 2004 presidential campaign and asked the vice president why he supported a constitutional amendment that would ban same-sex marriage even though one of his daughters, Mary Cheney, is a lesbian in a committed relationship.
Cheney's response ("Well, I say that my, uh, I have two fine daughters, I love them both, I'm proud of them both, and their private lives are private") was steely - and perhaps the first time on record that he addressed the seeming contradiction of his views.

**Newsom used as teaching tool**

Plante says the Cheney interview was one of his "proudest" career highlights ("I was the first reporter to ask him about his gay daughter"), though Plante's most recent interview with Gavin Newsom - the one in November, where the mayor was so flummoxed by Plante's questioning that he stormed off and said, "I'm amazingly disappointed ... amazingly. I just am" - also ranks high. Plante had peppered the mayor with questions about his seeming absence from public life in the wake of withdrawing from the governor's race.

Plante, who describes his interview style as "respectful, blunt and challenging," says "I know two political consultants who are using (my interview with Newsom) as a teaching tool to their candidates, to show how not to do an interview (with a reporter). That interview could have gone anyway that Newsom wanted it to. He could have been glib. He could have been charming."

A stark contrast was Plante's time with George W. Bush during the 2000 presidential campaign, when Plante had the confidence to ask the then-Texas governor: "I don't mean this disrespectfully (but) there are people who think you're not bright enough to be president. You've heard this?" Bush's response: "Sure." Plante's response: "What do you say to those people?" Bush: "I say go down to Texas."

Plante said Bush was gracious even after the cameras were turned off, showing no resentment at his line of inquiry. What most politicians didn't know is that Plante had once dreamed of working for a politician - or becoming one himself. This was in the late 1960s, when Plante was an undergraduate at Michigan State University. Plante, who grew up outside of Detroit, wanted "to change the world and make it a better place," and he thought politics would be the ideal forum.

**Falling in love with journalism**

Plante was president of his senior class in 1968, and soon after graduating in sociology, inspired by the lives of Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy, he moved to Washington, D.C., where he applied for jobs on Capitol Hill. In 1970, Plante was out of work when he happened to walk by the Washington Post.
"I thought this might be fun for a while - I have to pay the rent," Plante remembers. "I walked into the newsroom - back in the days when you could walk into a newsroom - and I applied for a job as a copy boy. This guy thought I was funny, and he hired me as a copy boy."

Plante worked at the Post for 2 1/2 years, promoted during that time to the copy desk. For the first year, he said, "it was just a job, but after a year, I fell in love with it - with newspeople, with how interesting they were, and how much they knew, and they could all talk for stuff, and they all seemed so young and had institutional memory."

Plante was restless, though, wanting to be a reporter, and a prominent Washington Post editor, Harry Rosenfeld (who would help direct the paper's Watergate coverage), told him to get experience at one of the Post's suburban affiliates, the Montgomery County Sentinel, which happened to have an opening because one of its reporters, Bob Woodward, had just been hired again at the Post. Woodward had worked previously at the Post for two weeks, around the same time that Plante began working there.

Initially, the Sentinel rejected Plante's application, but Plante persuaded the paper to give him a weeklong reporting tryout, during which he did general-assignment stories for free. Five years later, Plante was the Sentinel chain's managing editor.

**Transition to radio, tv**

Soon after, he made the transition to radio reporting and then TV journalism, first in Norfolk, Va., then in Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Houston and San Francisco. After arriving at KPIX, Plante reported on the AIDS crisis at a time when detailed information about the disease was scarce and the community was fearful about its spread.

Plante's stories, which included information on topics such as condoms and clean needles, "saved people's lives. ... People told me that," he says. "The government wasn't talking about AIDS. We were. We were doing stories every night."

In fact, KPIX devoted a team (including Plante) to covering AIDS in 1986, which led to the station's Peabody honor. Plante is proudest of this early reporting on AIDS and HIV. It was fitting, Plante said, that on his last working day at KPIX, March 24, his final piece was on an HIV-prevention campaign in San Francisco.

**Local, national honors**
In his career, Plante won local and national Emmys, and honors from the San Francisco AIDS Foundation and other organizations. His curriculum vitae includes investigative pieces and stories on weather, earthquakes and such features as the last days of an amusement-park ride. His tenure as KPIX's political editor lasted 10 years.

"It made the job fun," says Plante, who was lured into retirement by the station's buyout offer to staffers. "I have no regrets."

Last week, Plante moved with Groth from San Francisco to Palm Springs, to a house that features a large swimming pool. Plante had a photo of the pool on his KPIX desk. In the image, the chairs were empty. He joked with Sugerman that the chairs would be filled when he and Groth got there.

**Running out of cards**

Plante isn't sure what he'll do in retirement. He may do some writing, may even pen a book about politics. In his last days at KPIX, lots of people were asking about his future - and asking for his business card.

"I'm running out," Plante said to one person after handing him a card, "but I'm not going to reorder."

Plante smiled as he said this. Not a big smile but a smile nevertheless.

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