

JOEL WACHS

b. March 1, 1939

WARHOL FOUNDATION PRESIDENT

“... In those days, people were hiding, because the consequences of coming out would be so great.”

Joel Wachs is a former longstanding member of the Los Angeles City Council and the president of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. He is highly regarded for his lifelong arts advocacy.

Wachs was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania. At the age of 10, he moved to Los Angeles with his parents, who opened a successful chain of women’s clothing stores. Wachs attended UCLA and earned his law degree from Harvard Law School. He received a master’s degree in taxation law from New York University.

He is a lifelong arts advocate and the president of The Andy Warhol Foundation.

Wachs worked for five years as a tax attorney at an L.A. law firm before he turned his attention to local politics. In 1971 he was elected by a landslide to the Los Angeles City Council. At the age of 33, he became its youngest member. Reelected seven times by record margins, Wachs served as a councilman for 30 years.

During his tenure, Wachs earned a reputation as L.A.’s foremost champion of the arts, leading legislative initiatives that increased funding and support for cultural institutions and artists. He played a pivotal role in establishing the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, the Los Angeles Arts Commission, and the Los Angeles Endowment for the Arts. He also served as acting chairman of the National League of Cities Task Force on the Arts. In 1981 he was voted City Council president and served a two-year term.

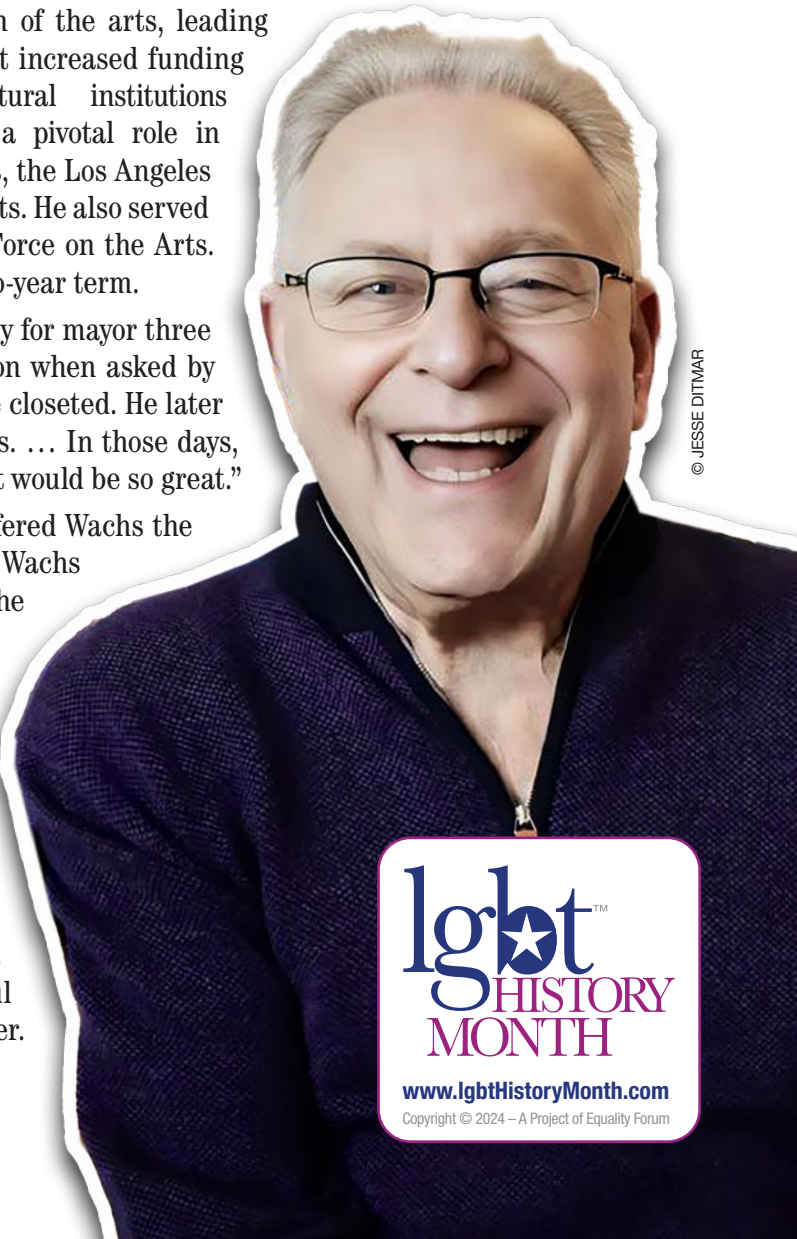
While serving on City Council, Wachs also ran unsuccessfully for mayor three times. Between elections, in 1999, he came out on television when asked by the interviewer if he was gay. At 60, Wachs had spent his life closeted. He later told the Los Angeles Times, “The suppression was enormous. ... In those days, people were hiding, because the consequences of coming out would be so great.”

In 2001 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts offered Wachs the job as president, and he resigned from politics. In this role, Wachs oversees one of the most influential organizations in the contemporary art world. The Warhol Foundation has awarded more than \$300 million in grants to over a thousand arts organizations and has donated over 52,000 works of art to more than 300 arts institutions worldwide.

In 2002 the L.A. City Council named the downtown intersection of West 2nd Street and South Grand Avenue “Joel Wachs Square.”

In the 2021 movie “Licorice Pizza,” set in the 1970s, Benny Safdie plays a closeted Los Angeles politician—a fictionalized version of Wachs. The film’s director, Paul Thomas Anderson, consulted with Wachs about the character.

Wachs lives in Manhattan, New York.



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