

# Rev. Hope offers compassionate closure for residents

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City Extra and asked if we would cover the memorials. Thus began a working relationship that has produced several hundred obituaries, most for people whose names had never been in print before.

Occasionally, Hope accepts invitations to go out of the TL for people who have a neighborhood connection. Once, at an Outer Mission church, 100 mourners gathered for Hope's service for a former prostitute she had known many years and who had stayed at SafeHouse, a residence Hope co-founded for prostitutes seeking a way out of the life. Another time, Hope went to a small Inner Mission SRO and gave a memorial for a young gay Japanese American artist she didn't know, who had hanged himself. She blessed his room. In Golden Gate Park, she officiated at a memorial for a Vietnam War veteran.

Hope has given upward of a thousand of her simple, yet elegant, Judeo-Christian memorials. Other faiths and nonbelievers, she invariably says at the beginning, are welcome. This approach, she says others tell her, is what keeps requests coming for her. On a rare occasion, another minister, priest or rabbi will do a memorial in the Tenderloin. But Hope does two to five memorials a month, more in winter. People shut down in the cold weather, she says. It's dark and things die. She has seen it time and again. She gave eight memorials in November 2010. This is from a Tenderloin population of 30,000.

Hope believes that when homeless people, who often are in poor health, move off the street into permanent housing they may give in to what ails them and die not long after. "Nobody wants to die alone, so outside they fight to hang on," she says. "Then, when they move in, they find peace, safety and comfort, and they can let go." No studies back up her observation, but she's seen it happen, time and again, enough to know it's true.

## HOPE'S PLATE IS FULL

Hope, who lives in the Crocker Amazon neighborhood, is executive director of San Francisco Network Ministries, the nonprofit she helped start in 1972. It ministers to the poor, especially women, in the Tenderloin and is a team ministry, she emphasizes, where everyone earns the same salary — "the world loves a star, but that is not, and should never be, the standard of a real ministry."

Network Ministries runs the Ambassador Hotel Ministry, SafeHouse, Tenderloin Community Church, the 366 Eddy St. Center and, with St. Anthony Foundation, a computer training center at 150 Golden Gate Ave. The Network Ministries headquarters building at 559 Ellis St., which it owns, also houses 38 low-cost, one- and two-bedroom apartments for poor families. It publishes the bimonthly Network Journal, which has 800 subscribers around the world.

But the memorials keep Hope in touch with the community in a way nothing else does.



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

Large turnouts like this one in 2004 at the Alexander Residence are rare and end, as all memorials do, with handholding in a circle.

"The memorials started in '77 or '78," she says. "We had a Catholic sister on staff and she was visiting elderly people in the Dalt Hotel. In those days, the Dalt was for-profit, rundown and awful."

Sister Clare Ronzani regularly visited a diabetic woman named Ruth who was chronically depressed. One day, Ruth jumped out of a fifth-floor window.

"We wanted to do something and we didn't know what," Hope says. "Sister Clare and I called Dan O'Connor (at St. Anthony's), who was a priest then, and the three of us got the word out and went to the Dalt Hotel lobby for a memorial. We didn't know if anybody would show up. We didn't know what we were going to do, either. So we just made it up as we went along."

But the men turned up in suits and ties, the women in dresses. Sister Clare played the guitar and sang. The room was filled.

"Afterward, the cookies weren't very good and something like Kool Aid was served," Hope continued. "But everyone had had a chance to remember Ruth."

Word of the memorial spread. "Hotel managers began calling us and city agencies who served the poor," she says. "Oh, it wasn't as many as we have now. But gradually the nonprofits, like TNDC, got involved."

## GROWING UP

Hope's journey to the Tenderloin seems unlikely. She was an active little girl growing up in Atlanta, playing basketball at school and softball during the summer — "the only sports girls were allowed to play in those days," she says. "No track, which I regretted; I was speedy."

Hope got her bachelor's degree from Florida State in 1958, and two years later earned a master's from the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Va. She came West to attend San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo and received her master's of divinity in 1969. She was 33 when she was ordained that May 17 at historic Old First Presbyterian Church where she was assistant pastor 1969-72, working with young adults.

She later was pastor at Seventh Avenue Presbyterian Church, 1978-89, in an arrangement that was off the Presbytery books and

unknown for years. She and four of her staff took turns preaching there to try to resuscitate a congregation that had shrunk to 15, while working fulltime in the TL. The "wonderful, progressive congregation," and a sanctuary church for Latinos, was on its feet and had grown to 120 when Network Ministries left.

Hope hadn't a clue she'd end up devoting her career to the Tenderloin. But she does what needs to be done, and that led her to the poorest, most crime-ridden neighborhood in San Francisco.

When Hope left Old First in November 1972 she found a space at 1036 Bush St. between Jones and Leavenworth and opened a nighttime drop-in coffeehouse for poor folks under her newly formed San Francisco Network Ministries. It became popular with Tenderloin people who went up the hill to Bush. Once, a man who had overdosed, stumbled in, saying, "I just knew if I got to the coffeehouse I'd be safe." He was taken to a hospital and survived. To Hope it was a sign to move down to the Tenderloin.

"We started with zero money and no connections, eight people and two dogs, making it up as we went along," Hope says. "There are a lot of stories in the Bible like that."

## IN THE BEGINNING

Her headquarters for several years was at 942 Market St. Then it was in a room next to St. Boniface Church on Golden Gate Avenue, before building the apartments at 555 Ellis St. in 1995 with Asian Neighborhood Design and moving into the downstairs. Seed money for the building, which cost \$7.5 million, came from the National Organization of Presbyterian Women. In the 1990s, prostitutes were being mauled and murdered. Hope went into the streets to talk and listen to the working women. More than anything, they told her, they needed safe housing. She took that on as a project.

In 1997, the Catholic Sisters of the Presentation, hearing of the plan, joined her. SafeHouse, 14 units at a Mission neighborhood address that's kept secret, opened in 2001 for prostitutes wanting a new life.

Hope has been as fervently anti-war as she has been a force for social justice. Back in 1961, she was jailed in North Carolina in a peace demonstration. In '69, as a seminary stu-

dent, she helped young men escape to Canada to avoid the draft and the Vietnam War. Pushing the envelope, she and two Army wives later went to talk peace to the Presidio's commanding general. When he wouldn't see them they sat-in at his office. That landed them in a holding cell for two hours. They were warned never to return.

But, of course, she did, in the late 1990s, with others, to demand that some of the vacant Presidio buildings be made into affordable housing. "We broke into one to make the point," she said. They were arrested.

And three years ago, Hope and 40 other religious people went to Sen. Dianne Feinstein's Market and Post office to lobby her on bringing the troops home. But when they arrived, the door was locked, so the group went outside and lay on the street tracks. "Everybody got arrested but me," she says. "A police sergeant walked me down a half block, said, 'Don't do it again,' and let me go. 'Nobody,' she quips, "wanted to take responsibility for the collar."

Still, memorials are the constant in her life that reaches out to her.

## AIDS MEMORIALS

A new chapter began in the 1980s, soon to be a horror that numbed the world.

"Hank Wilson was running the for-profit Ambassador Hotel (at the corner of Mason and Eddy, now a TNDC SRO), another depressingly scuzzy Rathole," she says. "It had a lot of mentally ill and depressed people in it, and Hank asked if we could come for visits — he knew we weren't judgmental about gays and lesbians."

"One day, Father John Hardin (now St. Anthony's board president) called and wanted to do something. He was then in the East Bay. We thought we might have an open-door room at the Ambassador for drop-in chaplainizing, you know, come in and talk."

"Hank gave us a room for it. We didn't know if anyone would come. After four months, though, they did — they saw that we weren't going away and that we were trustworthy."

That was the origin of the Listening Post, a spot at the Ambassador where residents find a willing ear.

Penny Sarvis, an S.F. Theological Seminary

student, came to Hope in the early 1980s through a hands-on, for-credit class credit and stayed 10 years.

"Dennis Conklin came to me and said so many with AIDS are dying and there's no service for them. So he and I recruited to make the Tenderloin AIDS Network in 1987. Leroy Looper (Cadillac Hotel) and Hank Wilson and Les Pappas and a doctor from the Haight Ashbury Free Clinics — can't remember his name — and Jerry DeYoung who helped direct services, until he, too, became an AIDS victim and died."

Hope and Sarvis did most of the memorials then.

"People would die within three to six months. In one 20-day period we did 21 memorials — not counting the homeless ones."

Ultimately the city got moving to fund a center where people could come for advice on safe sex and other help, but Hope had to pull out all the stops to swing the deal.

"We did a sit-in to get the money for it. The city had stalled so long that when they got the money, they only had three months left in the fiscal year to spend it."

Then it was arduous to cut through the city's red tape in meetings involving the rehab of the chosen building at the corner of Golden Gate and Leavenworth until the project got dangerously close to running out of time.

"We are trying to save lives here!" Hope pleaded with the building inspector at one meeting. "I cried," she said. "And I do not cry easily. The place got real quiet. Most thought I was a nun. Then he threw up his hands and said, 'I think I see a way.'"

She paused.

"A clerical collar, a Southern accent and a woman's tears," she summarized, then added with a faint smile, "I was younger and cuter then."

The resulting service, Tenderloin AIDS Network, which changed its name to TARC around 1990, was Network Ministries' program for its first five years.

## ANNUAL RITE FOR HOMELESS DEAD

Hope's largest memorial by far is her annual celebration for the homeless who die anonymously on the streets throughout the year. During a bitter winter 21 years ago, 16 people died of hyperthermia in the Tenderloin. Hope and 15 others went as a group to each spot that had been reported as an address where someone died, and paused.

"We were silent and someone slowly beat a drum. No one had a name. Then we moved on to the next place. At the end I said a prayer, and that was it."

Now the service happens every Dec. 21 at 5:30 p.m. in front of City Hall, rain or shine. Hope organizes the service and gets the names of the dead from the Department of Public Health, the Tom Waddell Health Center and the Coalition on Homelessness. Often other names are offered for inclusion in the rite by representatives of other Bay Area cities who attend. Clerics from a half-dozen religions speak briefly as the ceremony opens, then pre-selected volunteers take turns reading a handful of names. After each name is read, a bell is struck, the sound lingering eerily in the night air. At the end, Hope, wearing the familiar white silk stole her mother made for her, burns the list of names and the 40 to 100 mourners hug, then disappear into the night. In 2009, 95 names were read. In 2010, the number rose to 110.

Hope is as much a part of the Tenderloin fabric as St. Anthony's Dining Room, Glide or Boeddeker Park. Sidewalks that would intimidate a housewife from across town are her comfort zone, her paths toward passion.

One day I watched as a disheveled man stopped her a block from Boeddeker Park, dropped to one knee and begged her to bless him. She did, with simple dignity — the tiny, gray-haired woman in black, her hand on a kneeling man's bowed head, on an overcast day in the middle of the towering concrete jungle as cars rolled by and passing street people made mental notes. "It happens all the time," she says. "Usually they want me to say a prayer for them."

Her staff says Hope's "a kick" to work with — it's her sense of humor, her disarming utterances of truth, her amusement at the weird, tweeting jargon of the Internet.

"She encourages honesty," says staffer Susie Wong, director of operations. Hope seems energized by reality — good or bad. And she loves to lapse, impishly, into a thick accent to tell anecdotes from her Southern experiences. At any time she can call on "the look," the baleful eye she directs at someone like an idler blocking her Network Ministries doorway. "She'll go ask them if they can be somewhere else," Wong says, "then she gives them the look until they move."

Her contribution to the Tenderloin is well-known among her Presbyterian peers. Rev. Calvin Chinn, the interim Presbyterian executive director in Berkeley, says, "She is loyal, dedicated and prophetic to the end. Some may be a flash in the pan, but Glenda is real deal. She is mentor and teacher for so many of us."

A Jan. 7 memorial at the Ambassador for Michael Aylwin, attended by two staff social workers and resident Bill McLean, was a recent closure that gave everyone comfort. And it incidentally added weight to Hope's intimate understanding of death in the Tenderloin that often the homeless come in from the cold to get comfortable enough to let go and die peacefully.

Mr. Aylwin, who used a cane, had been homeless for five years before he came to the

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**Rev. Glenda Hope**, pictured at the Ambassador's Listening Post — a program she helped create during hard times in the 1980s — has been performing memorials in the neighborhood for 33 years.

**At the Listening Post:** Ambassador residents Minyon Harlin, left, and Jay Ensley with Rev. Hope



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