

Tenderloin stars

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tions with the city, and after then-Mayor Willie Brown threw his support to the site in the late 1990s, the alley was leased to 509 Cultural Center for \$1 a year as a neighborhood commons.

Today, the Tenderloin National Forest and annex have about seven shows a year, most by artists in residence. Residencies, for three or four artists a year, last up to three months. The artists can mount their final project at either the Forest or the annex, or, sometimes, use them as staging areas for a larger exhibition at the Market Street gallery. That was the case last fall with the “Hinterlands” show, a collaboration of four artists, two from an experimental arts space in Hanoi.

509 Cultural Center also presents regular music programs, spoken-word performances, poetry slams, readings and Swaine’s monthly Free Mending Library.

Choreographer and dancer Amara Tabor-Smith, Darryl Smith’s sister, is another Forest regular. She’s been developing a dance-theater piece called “Our Daily Bread” that she performs at other local venues. But once a month, she sheds her performance mantle and invites Forest neighbors to “Fresh From the Oven” — a cob oven, made of stones, molded wet sand and clay built in the center of the Forest.

“It’s a community-engagement event that brings people together to break bread,” Tabor-Smith says. “I make a big pot of what I call ‘recession stew,’ people bring bread and pizzas to bake and ingredients to make a salad, we share stories about food, listen to some music and just get to know one another.” Those who partake are a microcosm of the neighborhood, she says, and it always seems to work. “The Forest is a magical place — people seem to know that, even if they can’t articulate it.”

Lazer says that she and Smith regularly navigate the five blocks between their two main venues, though he spends more time at the Forest and she at the Luggage Store Gallery.

They bought the Market Street building with several investors in 1999, forming an LLC, a move that was a little nerve-wracking, Lazer says, but “felt like the right thing for us to do.” They’re hoping to buy out their LLC partners soon, put in an elevator and a roof garden, among other dreams.

And they’re hoping to fit into a mid-Market that, after decades of false starts, is becoming hot. Old buildings are being razed for a new shopping complex one block east, Zendesk and Zoosk have set up offices in that same block, Twitter, 800-employees strong, opened up three blocks west, Dolby Labs moves nearby this year and the list goes on.

Lazer wonders if they’ll fit in. “Some people may want our building to disappear,” she says.

Amy Cohen doubts that. As director of neighborhood business development for the Office of Economic and Workforce Development, Cohen says the Luggage Store has been a “catalytic institution” in mid-Market for a long time.

“The city has helped create a new brand for the area based on what was already there, like the gallery,” says Cohen. “It may be under the radar of the traditional arts scene, but it has a built-in, international following. That’s going to attract new businesses looking for a more cultural, perhaps edgier, environment so they can compete for the best employees.”

The artistic eclecticism of the urban, second-floor gallery can seem worlds away from the ground-level Forest, deep in the Tenderloin with its abundant, inviting flowers, ornamentals and trees.

“It’s all-inclusive and welcomes diverse visitors, just like the neighborhood,” Smith says. “If there’s any



PHOTO BY MARK DONEZA

Tenderloin resident Cheryl Conti, left, watches seamster Michael Swaine at Tenderloin National Forest repair one of three pairs of pants she’s brought him to fix for free. “I used to sew myself,” she tells Swaine, “but now I’m legally blind.” Pauline Autet, a student of Swaine’s at Cal, watches him work.

challenge there, it’s that people might have issues being comfortable with otherness — other classes and other cultures.” It’s a challenge he relishes, as does Lazer.

Diversity — “otherness” — figures strongly in their curatorial style. They seek out artists for shows and consider proposals from artists with the goal of “mixing it up,” Lazer says.

“We’ve changed a bit since we start-

ed out — we used to identify artists we wanted to show and gave priority to those from the neighborhood,” she says. “Now, we also look for artists just starting their career, and artists of color and women and transgenders, and some who’ve begun to succeed in the art market. Mostly, we want artists to experiment and do their vision. That’s our strong point.” ■

OBITUARIES

RALPH KEVIN URBANCIC

Found dead in his room

Jackie Ikeda flashed a mischievous grin and her eyes sparkled as she described how she and Ralph Urbancic “hit it off right away” when she moved to Civic Center Residence a year ago.

“Oh, what times we had Friday and Saturday nights out by the garbage cans,” said Ikeda, one of 14 residents who attended the Jan. 24 memorial for Mr. Urbancic. “I’m sure gonna miss him — we talked about serious stuff but also had some really good times. He gave me \$25 and I still have it up in my room.” Now that he’s gone, she didn’t think she’d spend it, she said, but instead keep it as a memento.

Mr. Urbancic, a Civic Center resident since 2009, was found dead in his room Jan. 14 by property management staff. He was 55.

Resident Abraham Fleming said he was used to seeing Mr. Urbancic daily, somewhere in the hotel, and was concerned when three days had passed without any contact.

“Kevin sure was a character, sometimes sad, sometimes morose, but with a wonderful sense of humor,” Fleming said. “We all make mistakes. He made his share of them, but he was a generous person who cared about his friends. On some of my worst days” — Fleming paused to wipe his eyes — “he was patient and there for me.”

Richard Beard is one of many residents who, like Mr. Urbancic, moved into the Civic Center after it was renovated in 2009. Beard told The Extra that Mr. Urbancic had liver cancer and



was receiving no treatment for it, but he believed that Mr. Urbancic had died of a drug overdose, not cancer. Social worker Erin Pidot later said the cause of death still was unknown.

“Kevin certainly had his own demons, but he also was childlike in many ways,” Beard said during the memorial. “Memorials like this are important — we see people around us pass, and realize we’re in a line and someday it will be our turn. We need to step up and see who’s around us now.”

Those gathered gave that sentiment an “amen,” adding that Mr. Urbancic was “always a wild child and a perfect gentleman at the same time,” “the life of the party,” “a man who couldn’t express what was going on inside him” and, simply, “someone who really understood what you meant.”

Homelessness, familiar to most residents here, often is reflected in what they share when they come together to say good-bye to a fellow resident. This day, one said he didn’t know Mr. Urbancic but had come to the memorial anyway.

“I can’t remember him exactly. Still, I’m happy these memorials take place. There’s lots of love and respect here for people who’ve died — and I’m glad he didn’t die on the streets.”

— Marjorie Beggs

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