

OBITUARIES

MICHAEL MALAK Rehabilitated

Samira Morcos tightly cradled the small black box and slowly, tearfully placed it on the table in front of a vase of flowers and a picture of her son, Michael Malak.

Three dozen people filled the meeting room at the Arlington Hotel for Mr. Malak's July 24 memorial and the chance to say what he had been to them — wonderful friend, loving son, cheerful resident.

"He was such a bright light here, always stopping by my office with a smile on his face and with something positive to say," said Melissa Eaton, the Arlington's resident services manager. "One of the things he wanted to do was start an AA group here at the hotel."

Mr. Malak had lived at the Arlington for nine months when he died July 16 from a heart attack. He was 49. The year before moving to the Arlington, he was a resident of the Salvation Army's Harbor Light rehab center.

"He was fighting a 30-year addiction," his brother Edmond told The Extra, "and I think it was the rules and discipline that finally helped him." Mr. Malak's other brother, Clark, and a nephew also attended the memorial.

Born in Cairo, Mr. Malak came to the United States when he was 13, and by 19, he'd begun a downward spiral that lasted three decades.

To his family, the results of his rehabilitation were astonishing. Pulling out of it, they said, he was able to live independently at the Arlington, get a credit card, pay his bills, get back the driver's license he'd lost 17 years before, talk to them regularly, attend family events, including a recent wedding, and visit his mother every weekend by bus.

"God let you live until you cleaned up your life," his mother said.

One by one, Arlington residents



PHOTO COURTESY OF MALAK FAMILY

and Harbor Light clients remembered Mr. Malak, who returned to the center often to help others.

Mr. Malak was an ace pool player, Jose recalled. "The first day he walked into Harbor Light he looked at me across the pool table and said, 'I'm going to be all right here because I see my twin brother.' We'd play pool morning to night."

"I actually beat him once in pool," said another client. "I'd give him crap and he'd give it right back, but all of it was good-natured."

Others said of him, "He wasn't perfect, but he had a glow about him. I cried like a baby when I heard he was gone."

"He always talked about the past and how he wanted to change himself on the inside."

"He came to the center same time as me. You could always tell when he was in a room — you could hear him laugh."

"He loved his family, wanted to stay in recovery and make you happy and proud."

Mr. Malak's death was unexpected by everyone except, perhaps, his mother. A week after the memorial, she told The Extra that he had come to visit her on July 13 and complained of pain, but when he got back to the Arlington, he called her to say it was gone. The next day on the phone he told her he was having trouble breathing. She rushed to see him. Again, he said he was okay and assured her he didn't need to go to an emergency room. She returned home.

They talked once more, on July 15. "He called me to thank me for some movies I'd sent him," she said. "When I called on the 16th, there was no answer, and again none on the 17th."

He was found July 18 during a regular pest inspection of hotel rooms. ■

— Marjorie Beggs

RICHARD RAMIREZ Desk clerk an awesome man

"My life is better because you're in it," said the thank-you card to Richard Ramirez from Hotel Iroquois resident Angelina Herman. She read the card she'd given him in the hospital shortly before he died.

"I didn't know he wouldn't get well — I was thanking him for being a good friend," she said tearfully at his July 16 memorial. "Now I'm having a hard time remembering he's gone. I wanted to call Richard today, but I couldn't."

Mr. Ramirez, who had lived at the Iroquois for 17 years, died July 11 at Chinese Hospital from complications of leukemia. He was 67.

Herman was friends with him for 10 years, "a trustworthy man who looked out for you, checking to see if you were okay," she said. "If you have a friend like that, be grateful."

Before he died, Mr. Ramirez gave Herman a key to his room and asked her to take everything. "He told me,

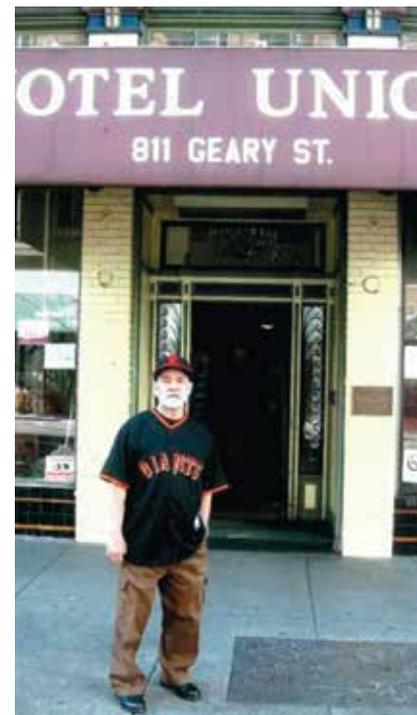


PHOTO COURTESY OF IROQUOIS HOTEL

'It's all yours,'" she said, which was a complete surprise and a measure of his trust. Herman didn't disclose what was in the room, but said some things were valuable, some not.

Of the 12 people at the memorial, several expressed sadness at Mr. Ramirez's passing, but none except Herman seem to have known him well, not even David Elliott Lewis, his neighbor on the sixth floor since 2007.

"I never got to know him, but I'm sorry he's gone," Lewis said.

Fellow residents knew little about Mr. Ramirez's past. Herman thought he was born in Texas, lived in Los Angeles, had a sister somewhere, but had no contact with her.

What everyone knew was that Mr. Ramirez had a job he liked as a desk clerk at the Hotel Union, 811 Geary. He worked there for about 10 years, right up until he was hospitalized. "Yeah, sure I knew him," a hotel co-worker told The Extra. "He was a cool guy."

Danny Mendez, the Iroquois' support services supervisor, said staff were in close contact with Mr. Ramirez and his doctors during the worst of his illness, when his twice-a-week chemotherapy took its toll, and for the several weeks he spent in the hospital before he died.

"Richard was frightened," Mendez said, "and we were hoping for the best for him. We'll miss him — he was an awesome man."

Another resident, a young man named Romano, remembered Mr. Ramirez as quiet and respectful. "I'm glad you're having this memorial for him," he said. "It's scary how many people pass away here every week." ■

— Marjorie Beggs



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