

COLLYNE COOK Rev. Hope's final memorial



COURTESY SAN CRISTINA

Collyne Cook was “a hard act to follow,” according to fellow San Cristina Residence tenant Mark Anthony, “but she was hella fun to be around.”

Anthony was one of a half-dozen friends who came to the memorial Dec. 13 to say good-bye to Ms. Cook and remember mostly her laughter — and her suffering. She died Nov. 27 at Laguna Honda Hospice from an undisclosed illness at age 57.

The bittersweetness of this gathering was sharpened because, after 40 years of service in the Tenderloin, it was the Rev. Glenda Hope's last time officiating a memorial. In the spirit of collaboration that has made Hope a neighborhood treasure, she introduced Earl Gadsden, saying they would conduct the memorial together.

Gadsden, a musician and regular BART station performer who has lived at the San Cristina since 2007, began by reading Isaiah 9:6 — “For unto us a child is born . . .” — and a passage from the New Testament, then sang “Amazing Grace” as he played a portable keyboard.

“This is my last memorial,” Hope said when the song ended. “I know so many of you and we've shared many of these occasions. Once more we're gathered to celebrate the life and mourn the death of one of our own.” And she invited everyone to share their memories of Ms. Cook.

Anthony, who said they had the same birthday, recalled her many “laughing but also crying times,” and another neighbor, Lee Williams, said they drank beer together but their relationship could be erratic.

“Sometimes we got angry with each other, but we also had fun,” Williams said. “I'm here today because I want to celebrate her life, remember the fun, not mourn her — that's just not in me.” He spoke more, then a little more and finally stopped: “Collyne's probably listening to me and laughing.”

Ms. Cook had lived at the San Cristina Residence for 16 years before her death. She and her husband, Phil Brunner, came to San Francisco from Fremont in 1989 and had a son, Joseph, who was raised in foster care. The couple moved to the San Cristina 1997 and she remained after he died eight years later.

In the obituary for Mr. Brunner, which is included in Study Center Press' “Death in the Tenderloin,” Ms. Cook said of her husband, “He was the best thing that happened to me in my life.”

To the sharing of memories at Ms. Cook's memorial, Gadsden added, “Every time Collyne greeted me she said, ‘Hey, honey!’ She always asked, ‘How ya doing?’ and she really meant it.

“My life is better because I knew her.”

Gadsden played his keyboard and asked everyone to join in the gospel song, “Another day's journey, and I'm glad about it.”

As she had with every memori-

al, Hope ended with the Presbyterian Worship Book verse, as “the shadows lengthen and the evening comes . . . grant us peace at the last.” She asked everyone to stand, hold hands and “give your neighbor the sign of peace.” Each person gave a hug to the person on either side of them. ■

— Marjorie Beggs

AL SHAPANUS Baseball equipment manager

Albin C. “Rattlesnake” Shapanus, who died in his sleep in his room at the Pierre Hotel on Sept. 4, was so well-liked that three memorial services were held in his honor.

Jana Drakka, a Zen priestess, presided over one at the Pierre, where he'd lived for decades — longer than anyone could remember. At the San Francisco Senior Center, where he'd eat and hold court, friends displayed photos showing him in different guises — “He was Halloween all year long,” one friend recalled. And his family celebrated a Mass at St. Boniface for him Oct. 2.

At X-Press Market at O'Farrell and Jones, where he worked stocking shelves and often hung out entertaining anyone who'd care to listen, his picture now looks down from above the front counter.

Despite his prominence in the community, though, and his penchant for spinning yarns, it seems that “The Commish,” as he was also known, kept some of the most colorful stories of his past to himself.

“We have a strong suspicion that my uncle was receiving a Major League Baseball pension,” his niece, Joanna Shapanus, told The Extra.

Mr. Shapanus, it turns out, worked as an equipment manager in Major League Baseball and other professional sports for decades, and knew many famous athletes.

Bart Swain of the Cleveland Indians confirmed that Mr. Shapanus was team equipment manager 1957-61, when the roster included baseball household names Roger Maris, Billy Martin, Larry Doby, Minnie Minoso, Rocky Colavito, Jimmy Piersall, Chuck Tanner, Don Newcombe and “Sudden Sam” McDowell.

“He was part of that golden age of baseball,” his nephew, Chris Shapanus, said. “Rocky Colavito was a good friend. Billy Martin too.”

Although Kansas City A's records are hard to come by Mr. Shapanus is in the 1962 team photo. Chris Shapanus said his uncle also worked for the Orioles' 1971 World Series-winning team. The Baltimore Orioles' owners also had a short-lived professional soccer team, the Baltimore Bays, and Mr. Shapanus can be seen in a 1968 photo of that team. His nephew also said the TV documentary “Great Teams, Great Years” includes footage of Mr. Shapanus on the sidelines playing catch with quarterback Johnny Unitas, whose Baltimore Colts shared a stadium with the Orioles.

“He told me a lot of stories about Lou Gehrig and Joe DiMaggio,” UCSF social worker Alison Murphy said. “I thought he was yanking my chain.” When she finally met Mr. Shapanus' family, she said, “They had the same stories. If I had known . . .”

“It was shocking to find out,” Bill Marotta, who knew Mr. Shapanus for the past seven years, told The Extra. “Al was known to exaggerate. He would tell us stories about how they would let him in the side door, but never said anything about employment. Unbelievable, we never knew that.

“Our conversations were always centered around New York,” Marotta, who grew up in Hoboken, N.J., said at the Pierre Hotel memorial. Their common geographic roots gave them “an automatic bond. He was old school, reminded me of all the guys I knew back East.”

Contrary to Marotta's impression

that Mr. Shapanus was a native New Yorker, however, Chris Shapanus said his uncle was one of eight children born to Lithuanian immigrants who fled the Russian Revolution — his grandfather, born in 1873, defected from the czar's cavalry, he said — and settled in Pennsylvania coal country.

Mr. Shapanus was a promising baseball player as a youngster, but hopes of turning professional were dashed when he was hit by a milk truck, badly injuring his leg. He looked into becoming an umpire, but was discouraged from that pursuit, also because of his injury, and so found his place as an equipment manager Chris and Joanna Shapanus said.

At the Pierre, however, the common belief was that Mr. Shapanus' injury had been sustained in the Korean



War. Dates on the photos posted on the senior center walls said Mr. Shapanus was born in 1924, but family members put the year as 1928, making him 85 when he died.

“I was present with him at many appointments at Social Security,” Murphy said. “I would ask Al about that directly and he would say, ‘That depends on who's asking. He was old. I left it at that.’”

“He lived by his own rules,” Chris Shapanus said. “And from what I understand, he just decided to leave.” He had a pacemaker, his nephew said, but was otherwise in good health.

Mr. Shapanus is also survived by a brother, George, who lives in Montana, four sons, four grandchildren and numerous nieces, nephews and cousins.

Mr. Shapanus was “involuntarily estranged” from his sons, his nephew

said, when his wife remarried and the stepfather adopted the children. Chris Shapanus, who grew up in Baltimore, said his uncle “lived an independent life” after his baseball career ended in the '70s. His strongest memory of his uncle, he said, was when he showed up when the Orioles were playing in the '83 World Series.

They took the bus downtown and walked into the stadium without tickets — his uncle “knew one of the cops in the breezeway” — sat down behind home plate and enjoyed the game. Afterward, they went to the stadium club where he met trumpeter Chuck Mangione, who'd played the national anthem. Then they took the bus home. All that, the nephew said, “at a total cost of 40 cents each way.”

“He was the good, the bad, the ugly, but the good was good,” Marotta said. “He had a spice of life that he never lost.”

“He would curse you — and thank you — for holding the elevator,” a fellow Pierre resident said. “It's a shame we don't get to know each other better.” He added: “It's a syndrome of SRO living.”

Mr. Shapanus would hold sidewalk sales on Geary Street and was remembered, too, for passing out tiny bottles of brandy during the holidays.

“He knew how to make you laugh. He was a good friend. He always wanted everything to be right,” a woman said through tears. “He was classy. He would say what he wanted to say, but when he said it, it was for a reason.”

“I don't think he liked me very much,” a resident named Terry said. But “when they made Al, they broke the mold. That's what I liked about him. He was straight-up.”

Doctors had wanted to amputate his injured leg in recent years, Marotta said, but Mr. Shapanus wouldn't allow it. “He never complained,” Marotta said. “He adjusted — no real mean feelings against anyone, he seemed to appreciate life.” His nickname, which Marotta said Mr. Shapanus liked, referred to a road-kill rattlesnake he found and, as a gag, tossed into a passing convertible.

“He was very salty, but also very kind, generous if he knew you well,” Marotta said. “He came on gruff, but if you came back at him, he loved you.”

Robert, a janitor at the hotel, recalled Mr. Shapanus' business card: “International playboy, soldier of fortune, for hire,” it read.

“He was a character and we'll miss him,” Robert said. ■

— Mark Hedin

GOOD NEWS

REMEMBERING LIBBY Elizabeth Denebeim, a lifelong, citywide volunteer and Study Center board member who died Nov. 15, continues to be lauded for her community service in the fields of education, health, mental health, domestic-violence prevention, gay rights and more (see Appreciation in December-January Extra). As described in the Dec. 17 Congressional Record, Sen. Barbara Boxer asked her colleagues “to join me in honoring the memory of Elizabeth ‘Libby’ Denebeim, a pillar of the San Francisco community,” then added details of Libby's life that appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle obituary. State Sen. Leland Yee, who before he won

state office served on the S.F. school board with Mrs. Denebeim, asked that the Jan. 6 Sacramento session be adjourned in Libby's honor, according to the Senate Journal. And at the Jan. 22 meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women, Vice President Andrea Shorter introduced a resolution recognizing Libby for her “tireless commitment to advancing the cause of women's rights, looking out for the lesser-abled among us. She was always a great reminder of what we can be.”

TAX FILERS If your 2013 household income was less than \$52,000, you can get free tax help from IRS-certified tax preparers at EarnIt!KeepIt!\$aveIt! sites, and you may qualify for a refund from the Earned Income Tax Credit. The central city has eight tax help sites. Also this year, at one location and for one day only, get help enrolling in the new health care system: UC Hastings, 200 McAllister, Feb. 15, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. For hours, what information to bring for tax help and health care enrollment, whether an appointment is needed and languages spoken, go to earnitkeepitsaveit.com. ■

— Marjorie Beggs