

Elders a minority for SRO memorials

Tenderloin residents die younger than the citywide mortality rate

By Tom Carter

It's a paradox, but in the Tenderloin's SROs the elderly die young.

A leading witness has been Rev. Glenda Hope, who retired this year after performing more than 1,000 memorials over nearly 35 years. Most requests came from the nonprofits that house the formerly homeless and destitute who are referrals from city programs.

"I didn't have many elderly," Hope said in an interview shortly after officiating her last memorial in February. "There were so many under 40 or 45. They were poor, many used drugs and had multiple health problems, homeless, too — all that trauma and they die young."

"It was pretty unusual for someone over 55. But I didn't keep score."

In "Death in the Tenderloin," the Study Center Press book that features obituaries from The Extra, the average age is 55. Tenderloin medical clinic experts, quoted in the book, also attested that TL life spans are 20 years shorter than the city's average.

"If they were elderly, they probably had had more attention," Hope said. "People looked after them."

Among those exceptional cases were: Anthony Gagliano, 80, married 54 years and still head over heels in love; Joseph Soldivela, 78, whose son was with him in his room watching "True Grit" when he died; Chui Tao, 96, who had an attentive daughter and a devot-

ed, longtime caregiver; and Gyulli (Julie) Martirosyan, 91, with two doting daughters who visited often.

Another factor helping elders stay alive is a sense of community, Hope says, and memorials — dignified closures for life — enhance that feeling of togetherness.

Residents tend to isolate themselves, Hope says, but memorials get them out of their rooms to come together. Sometimes only a handful show up, other times, when a strong personality among them has passed, mourners fill the room.

"They share what they've gotten from, or given to, the person, and it contributes to getting to know each other," Hope says.

"Some say, 'I didn't know him, or her,' or often they don't know the other people there. But it's good to reach out to each other and to see that the social worker cares and that there's care in the room — and to realize it can happen for them, too. We never know how much time we have. We all hope we'll have a memorial when we die."

"So I think it gets them to care for each other, to visit, maybe to take a walk together."

In February, Hope turned over her role to Rev. Paul Trudeau, a handsome, 38-year-old minister, like Hope a Presbyterian. Trudeau grew up in Portland and New Orleans and has a graduate degree in biblical studies from Reformed Theo-



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

Rev. Paul Trudeau conducts SRO memorials since Rev. Glenda Hope retired. At a recent memorial he talks with Lindsay Nelson, Well Women's Center coordinator.

logical Seminary in Orlando, Fla. He was on the staff of the Korean Presbyterian Church of Orlando, then at the Korean Central Presbyterian Church in Vienna, Va., before becoming director of City Hope San Francisco, a subsidiary of City Church that has a staff of 20 and seven programs throughout the city, including one at the jail. Trudeau, who heads City Church's social justice programs, is married and has two children.

"He's a very warm guy and inclusive and that's why I chose him," Hope says. Trudeau accompanied her on a couple of her memorials "to get a sense of it." She advised him to "be clear who he is," to wear clerical clothing because "the symbolism gives dignity," encourage people to talk and let them sing.

"It's a rich experience," Hope says. "It was for me. The main thing we want to do is to convey respect for everyone — for the mourners' comfort, and we don't want (deceased) people just disappearing."

For Trudeau, coming into this unusual scene in the city's poorest neighborhood and having a mentor of Hope's age, 77, and accomplishments is a prime experience. City Hope, with headquarters at Sutter Street and Van Ness Avenue, has among its programs Christian counseling services for support groups ranging from divorce to chronic pain. It recently leased an office at 746 Ellis St. two blocks from Hope's old Network Ministries office. But the space needs build-out and a zoning change from residential/commercial to religious/social services that may take a year before it opens. The impending move delights Trudeau to be "a neighbor."

"The more memorials I do, the more I'll learn," he says, sitting in his Sutter Street office. He compared the Tenderloin services with traditional rites. "Memorials among the wealthy are staged. They follow an agenda," he said. "Here, you're never quite sure what will happen. The other day, I didn't know that man and woman would come up and lead a prayer and then sing."

Hope got along well with the poor. She was quick and appropriate with the give and take, gentle, yet decisive and firm. It seemed that no uncomfortable disruption or outburst could unhinge her. Away from the memorials, she was a well-known activist, not just for the Tenderloin but for peace and justice throughout the city and in the world. The 5-foot-tall minister had a huge image. It was bolstered in June by a front-page profile of her in the Los Angeles Times that focused on her role in the memorials. It made her slippers even bigger to fill.

"Glenda was quite the ringmaster," Trudeau says with admiration,

Trudeau comes into the TL from another place. He divides his Sundays between two City Church congregations with about 1,000 regulars comprised largely of techies and yuppies. They attend services at the Russian Cultural Center on Sutter near Divisadero and

the Mission Presbyterian Church at 23rd and Mission.

"They (the well-heeled) are not bad people," he says. "But the new ones to the city have sort of been demonized for their success. We need to find the passion to build relationships. We need to become us."

The mission of City Church is to get every congregational member out volunteering in the community and creating "healthy relationships." They are ripe for trainings for City Hope programs that Trudeau oversees, such as mentoring kids in Visitacion Valley and adult County Jail inmates.

Trudeau has been a County Jail chaplain eight years, conducting several services weekly. He also trains volunteers in a one-year program to mentor soon-to-be-ex-cons, men in recovery, mostly from addictions. For six years the training has provided ex-prisoners a personal, on-going support system after jail. A women's pilot program with five inmates meeting biweekly with mentors has been going six months.

"It's getting people to talk about their wounds," Trudeau says. "It's showing their humanity, and it's a great equalizer. It can unify people. We're trying to build healthy relationships. Problems to fix can follow. You need a big heart for addicts, but one with a lot of wisdom. But the mentees are the drivers (of this) in life."

In jail, Trudeau deals with inmate paranoia and schizophrenia. "And you have to listen. It forces you to be very present, which I like." And he's heard many stories of trauma, self-inflicted bodily damage, bad diets, all a recipe, he says, "for a shorter life."

He thinks his time in County Jail has served him well for memorials in the TL.

"You're in a room with unknown people and their stories, and you faithfully show up and listen. I hear a lot about the trauma. I've spoken to so many people who have lost children in the TL. What generation is this? Not mine, and I don't know them well. How did they find their way to the TL?"

At the outset of a memorial, when he introduces himself as a Protestant minister, his ambition to serve the Tenderloin is palpable. He is present and he is listening and also feeling his way along. One day perhaps a Tenderloin resident mentoring program could be in his sights, he has said. But for now, memorials rule.

"When we lose someone, our fabric is torn and we mourn together," he says. "People look at each other. They feel sorrow together and they go forward. It draws us closer to our neighbor."

"So we're built for sorrow, too. What's unhealthy is to bury it. Don't avoid the tears. Blessed are those who mourn, it's the Scripture. I believe in a God that's in our pain."

"This goes against isolation."

And, the hope is, this sense of community may add days, months or years to a life. ■

OBITUARY

JOHN GRANT Pillar of the Iroquois

The Iroquois Hotel lost a major community-builder at the Ellis Street SRO when popular 12-year resident John Grant, known for his warmth and generosity, passed in March after months of failing health from diabetes and other ills.

His death also broke up the "dynamic duo," as one resident described his teaming with Enebra Dunne to stage the hotel's Christmas parties and other events. Dunne, his third-floor neighbor from across the hall, organized them; Mr. Grant paid for them, making sure everyone got presents.

"Anything to do with kids," Dunne said. "He was a pillar of his community."

"He had a smile that would light up the room," said Helen Jackson, his sister from Oakland. "And if he was upset, you'd never know it."

Dunne and Jackson were two of more than three dozen mourners who filled the third-floor community room at Mr. Grant's March 19 memorial. Rev. Paul Trudeau, who conducted the memorial, read Scriptures, a man in a black suit and tie came to the front to deliver a long prayer shaking his hands emotionally as his voice rose, a guitarist played and sang "Amazing Grace," a woman in a red dress sang a gospel song with the suited man and another woman read a poem she wrote about Mr. Grant leaving 835 Ellis St. — "his address has changed!" — to honor the man they adored.

Three large bouquets and a half dozen votive candles decorated the table in front where more than 30 snapshots of Mr. Grant and friends were displayed.

"He was very personable and outgoing, charismatic, giving of spirit," said Angela Hayes, "especially when it came to children. And he greeted everyone."

Hayes, who knew Mr. Grant eight



PHOTO COURTESY OF IROQUOIS HOTEL

years, said on every birthday he gave her daughter Chloe, 4, \$20. "And I think he did that for other children."

The 74-unit Community Housing Partnership building has 11 families and about 10 kids.

Mr. Grant died of "internal bleeding," March 7 after a week in S.F. General Hospital. He was 61.

Mr. Grant was born in St. Louis and had four children there. Friends guessed that he came to California 20 years ago. Jackson said Dunne told him he had driven an Entenmann's pastry truck for a while and a Chronicle delivery truck before failing health ended his driving career.

"He had a great-grandson, 2 months," said Jackson. "He wanted to go back to St. Louis and see them all. He kept saying he was going, but he was sick. He didn't know if he'd be allowed to travel."

Afterward, friends pitched in as generously as Mr. Grant would have done to provide two tables of food: tubs of green salad and potato salad, fried chicken and barbecued chicken, rice, veggie plates and soft drinks, cookies and cake. ■

— Tom Carter