

Tenderloin lamplighter – one of a kind

‘Volunteering has been an integral part of my lifestyle for 40 years’

BY MARJORIE BEGGS

IN the service-saturated Tenderloin, one community volunteer stands apart from all others. In fact, he and the service he provides are unique in the city.

Mark Brown is the modern version of the 19th century lamplighters who lit and extinguished gas streetlights before being rendered obsolete by electricity.

Every four to six weeks, Brown rises at 4 a.m., grabs his clipboard and flashlight, and leaves his Tenderloin apartment to check the streetlights between Geary, Golden Gate, Mason and Larkin. If one is out, he shines his flashlight at the base of the pole, notes its ID number and location, and contacts Public Works, the Public Utilities Commission or PG&E the next day.

“It’s a self-starting job that I can do independently,” said Brown, who over two nights checks 269 lights in all. “When all the lights are working, it’s a sign that the neighborhood’s being kept up. And I’m providing a useful service — people can negotiate the streets more safely and the police do their job better.”

His routes are circuitous but comprehensive. One night he goes up and down the east-west streets from Mason to Larkin — along Geary (30 lights); along O’Farrell and Ellis (41 lights); along Eddy and Turk (65 lights); and from Market Street to Larkin along Golden Gate and McAllister (36 lights). The second night he does the north-south streets.

Brown started his early-morning forays five years ago after linking up with a DPW rep at a Tenderloin Futures Collaborative meeting.

“I told him what I wanted to do and he encouraged me, and I’ve been doing it ever since,” Brown recalled.

The idea hadn’t come to Brown as an inspired flash. As a youngster, he checked streetlights in Long Island and Brooklyn, where he was born and raised, in addition to visiting shut-ins and doing other good deeds.

“It was all as part of my volunteer work,” explained Brown, a San Franciscan since 1979. “I’d say that volunteering has been an integral part of my lifestyle for 40 years.”

Besides checking streetlights, he volunteers for the Central City SRO Collaborative, works with two Baptist churches handing out bags of groceries in the Bayview and Western Addition, is an active member of Alliance for Better District 6 and regularly advocates for the rights of the disabled.

Before a major stroke limited his activities, he owned Envirodyne, a heating, ventilating and air conditioning business in the

city. As a young man, he drove a truck and did construction work.

Brown talks knowledgeably about the vintage 1920s and ’30s lampposts along Larkin that use 250- to 300-watt mogul-based incandescent bulbs and, he says, seem to last longer than the high-pressure sodium incandescents on other streets.

“I used to find five or six lights out every time I went out, but the number has dropped. It was four the last time I went out, and once I only found one.”

Citywide, PUC owns and maintains 22,000 streetlights. DPW, several other city agencies and PG&E together own another 20,000.

To get PG&E lights replaced, Brown calls an 800 public-access “trouble” number in Sacramento, wades patiently through the telephone tree and eventually gets to a human — a different one every time — who takes down the light pole number and location.

“When I first started this, PG&E didn’t deem this problem serious enough. In 2004, it came to a head when I said I wanted to talk to a supervisor.”

From barely responding, PG&E now gets the lights fixed in six to 10 days. The city takes two to four days.

He worries that the city response may slow because his contact in the DPW street lighting division retired recently. Brown says he’s giving up the direct approach.

“The other people there think I’m a pest,” he said.

His latest plan: When he goes out to check lights, he’ll list those that aren’t working in a letter to Khoa Nguyen, community organizer at the Safety Network Program, which collaborates on crime prevention with the Mayor’s Office of Neighborhood Services, the police and the community.

Brown met Nguyen when he made a presentation about Safety Network activities at the March Tenderloin Futures Collaborative meeting. Nguyen urged community members to give him monthly feedback on streetlight and signal outages, abandoned cars and other concerns. He promised to use his connections to resolve problems and report back on their status right away.

“Our plan with Mark,” said Nguyen, “is that I’ll take his information, then pass it on to Jason Chan [District 6 rep for the Mayor’s Office of



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

At the corner of McAllister and C.J. Brenbam, the micro-street off Market, Mark Brown points to one of the 269 streetlights he checks regularly for outages.

Neighborhood Services]. He’ll forward it to whoever he thinks can get it fixed quickly.”

The Extra called Chan several times to find out how expeditious he thinks the new process will be, but our calls weren’t returned.

The Extra also checked the PUC’s Web site, which has an on-line form the public can use to report lights that aren’t working. If the light reported isn’t one of PUC’s, staff will forward the info to the appropriate agency. The site also includes phone numbers for light-related emergencies — toppled or leaning poles or hanging fixtures. But it has no phone number for reporting lights that are simply out.

Brown has no computer.

As it was for the lamplighters before him, technology may be the downfall of Brown’s work. ■

The Extra and Southside merge

Southside Newsletter, a publication of articles and information about South of Market people and issues, has been merged into the Central City Extra.

Each issue of The Extra will carry stories under the Southside signpost. The Extra also will produce a resource guide for the Tenderloin and SoMa as part of this merger.

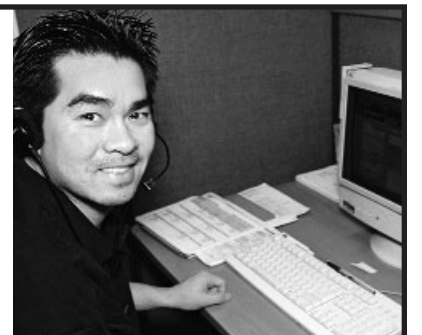
The Southside stories and resource guide are funded by the Koshland Committee of the San Francisco Foundation, which is completing five years of service to SoMa.

“This expansion of our coverage to SoMa on a regular basis is an opportunity for The Extra to better serve our central city readers, said Geoff Link, editor and publisher. So many issues are the same no matter which side of Market Street you’re on.” ■

Need Help? Call 2-1-1.

2-1-1 San Francisco is a free community information service, confidential, 24-hour, and available in over 150 languages. Call to get free information about:

- ▶ Food, clothing, shelter, rent assistance, utility assistance
- ▶ Job search assistance, financial assistance, education programs
- ▶ Physical and Mental Health Resources
- ▶ Support for Seniors and Persons with Disabilities
- ▶ Support for Children, Youth and Families
- ▶ Volunteer opportunities and donations



You can search for help online at www.211sf.org

From cell phones call 415-808-HELP.

United Way • AIRS
2-1-1
Get Connected. Get Answers.

United Way
United Way of the Bay Area