

EVERYONE GETS IN THE ACT

The day desk clerk, Aaron Jones, a former Oakland schoolteacher, at the urging of property manager Roberta Goodman, said he wrote a poem about the Tenderloin. It was a dark account of its hard streets, despair and perils. Joe Shelton, a Vietnam veteran, strode up with his guitar and gave a James Taylor-like rendition of "Carry Me," a song about being transported back to love and family, beauty and serenity. He followed it with the 1960s hit "Get Together," and people hummed, sang and clapped as the familiar lyrics filled the room: "C'mon people, now smile on your brother, ev'ry-body get together, try to love one another right now."

From a front row seat, lanky Roni "Macaroni" Armbuster struggled to stand on legs that never got right after an accident years ago. He pushed his walker forward a few feet, turned and sat on the seat to tell a couple of stories. With his wispy, full gray beard, black and white plaid cap and drawling country baritone, he was the epitome of an apple barrel raconteur. He knew just the right volume for the punch line in the story from his youth about God assigning longevity to the sex lives of his creatures.

Sonja Porter didn't have a song or poem. But the crowd called her up to do something, anything. The thin, diminutive black woman stood beaming in front of the crowd, held up her hands and wiggled her fingers and said, "I do love you all. I do love you all. Spread the love."

Irving Saraf was hunched behind his camera on a ramp next to the goodies table and caught all of it on film. He and partner Allie Light have been recording life at the Empress for a year. They did the behind-the-scenes documentary, "In the Shadow of the Stars," about the devoted, paid singers in the San Francisco Opera Chorus that won an Oscar in 1991. Roberta Goodman is a partner in the Empress project and has a 12-minute clip of residents telling their life stories that she shows to potential financial backers. Most tales are poignant and some are riveting.

ENCORES GALORE

The hour of talent was such a success that a second round of performing began. Ron Rucker came back to sing "She's a one-man woman (and that's all she is)." Tina Knox belted "Mr. Telephone Man" this time. And Joe Shelton, having heard some improvised harmony when he played, came back to try to capitalize on it. But people weren't familiar with his song and the effort petered out.

"It's great to be a part of this community," said Saunders before the raffle drawing. "There are all those people outside, but we're inside having fun. I couldn't be more proud. I witnessed a miracle. Not



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

Vietnam vet Joe Shelton stirred the crowd with nostalgic 1960s tunes, and had everybody humming.

long ago I couldn't get four of you in one room." It seemed that half the residents in the room were raffle winners. The prizes ranged from \$25 Safeway and Giants souvenir certificates to lottery tickets and a CD by singer Beyonce.

Afterward, Saunders, the hotel's tenant representative before Wilson, explained his remark about the change in tenant attitude.

"It's leadership basically," he said. "It's the same people in other SROs, but here they respond."

Saunders is on the staff of the Central City SRO Collaborative. He said he and Randy Wilson had learned about life after addiction because they got straightened out with "spiritual transformations" through the support of the Rescue Mission's Clint Ladine and Pastor Earl Rogers.

RESCUE MISSION'S ROLE

"Ninety percent of the residents here have had substance abuse problems and most are dually

diagnosed," he said. "And the Mission has had a significant role in helping develop the male residents here. Randy brought that development back here to the Empress to help create programs and services."

As a result, he said, tenant meetings now average 25%-40% turnout, way higher than most SROs. "I know this from what I see and hear about other SROs at the collaborative."

"Before this evening, Randy went door to door encouraging people, and if he didn't they wouldn't have come. That's commitment."

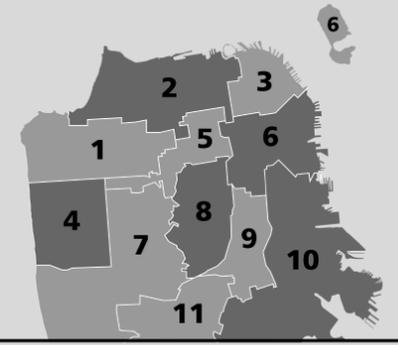
Management also plays a part, he said. So many residents at other SROs experience harassment, internal problems and communication difficulties. But Goodman, he said, is "extraordinary" and has integrity and the Empress is "fortunate to have her, although we disagree sometimes."

After this success, Goodman said, there will be another Open Mic night, but no date was set. ■

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For the November 7, 2006 Election, San Francisco voters will use ranked-choice voting to elect the Assessor-Recorder and Public Defender.

San Francisco voters who live in Supervisorial Districts 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 will also use ranked-choice voting to elect their Member of the Board of Supervisors.

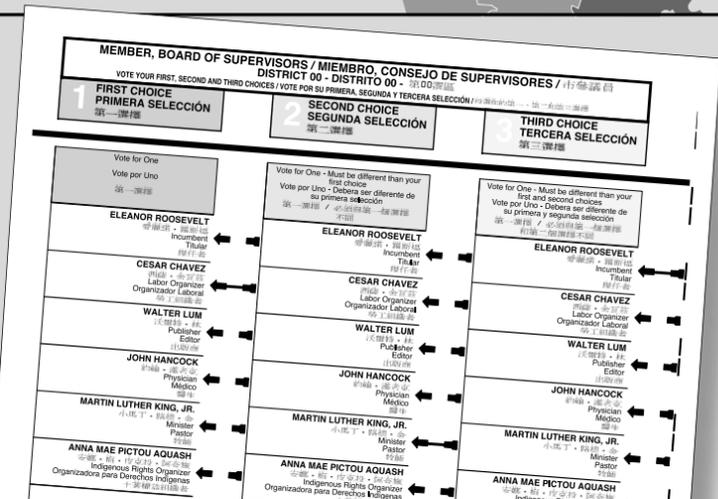


With ranked-choice voting, the names of all the candidates are listed in three side-by-side columns on the ballot. This allows you to rank up to three candidates for the same office.

If there are fewer than three candidates, or to rank fewer than three candidates, you may leave any remaining columns blank.

Learn More About Ranked-Choice Voting!

For more information on ranked-choice voting, or to find out what district you live in, contact the San Francisco Department of Elections at (415) 554-4375 or visit www.sfgov.org/election.org.



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