

Canon Kip: The glue that held a community together

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and others. You didn't need a newsletter, you just went to Canon Kip to find out what was going on. And over the next five years I got to know the larger SoMa community network that revolved around the Community House.

Right across Eighth Street was Westbay Filipino Multiservice Agency's Teen Center. Not only did the kids go back and forth daily between the two, but so did the staff. Just out of college they got a job with Westbay, moving to work at Canon Kip after a few years of experience. Or vice versa. Ed del la Cruz, its longtime director, seemed to be at Canon Kip as often as Westbay (he passed away in the early 1990s). There was no organizational rivalry or "turf."

EVERYBODY KNEW EVERYBODY

Most of the seniors played bingo and worshipped at St. Patrick's Church on Mission Street whose longtime pastor, Monsignor Clement McKenna, was also a TODCO board member. He had spearheaded the parish's development of Alexis Apartments senior housing on Fifth Street, opened in 1974 with resident programs provided by Sisters of Mercy living at the rectory (now all passed away).

Or they could choose the Salvation Army Senior Activities Center in the former Mission-style Southern Police Station on Fourth Street that the Redevelopment Agency had granted to the Army along with its Silvercrest Residence senior housing site, completed in 1972. Bingo and dancing were not allowed, but the lunch program and pool tables were always full. Maj. Evelyn Dexter (long since retired), who only wore her uniform for official Salvation Army events, ran a popular professionally staffed secular center with a very busy calendar and many good times until the late 1980s, when the Army closed all the programs except the meal site as it refocused internationally on its evangelical mission, turning the Yerba Buena Center over to a uniformed minister and his wife to run as part of the chapel.

The St. Patrick's Childcare Center next to

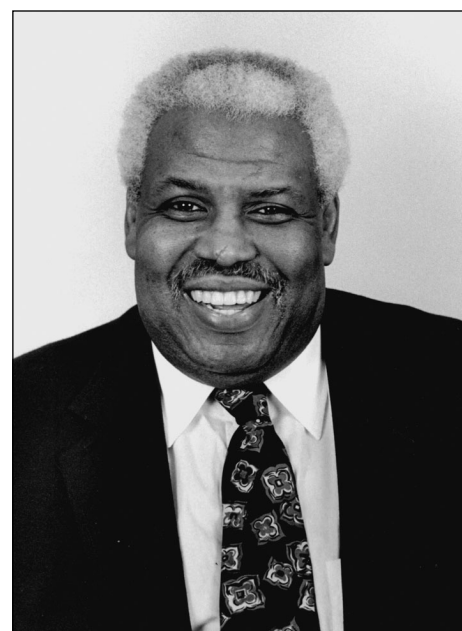
the Alexis Apartments on Clementina Street also had a gym that the Police Athletic League used for weekly games. Judy Baker began there as a child care worker in 1976. In the years since, as executive director, she successfully led the center's expansion into the new Yerba Buena Gardens Child Development Center, and recently, its relocation into new affordable housing at Eighth and Howard streets where it continues to care for SoMa's preschoolers today.

Bessie Carmichael School was of course the center of SoMa family life. Its rundown "temporary" buildings (finally replaced by the new school in 2005) were very modest, but its principal and longtime teachers cared. The nearby Filipino Education Center on Harrison Street provided bilingual support for immigrant children. Three generations of SoMa kids had passed through by 1980, plus two or three more by now with more to come. Throughout most of the '90s, Dr. Ruth Hill provided the only private psychotherapy for kids in SoMa through a city-funded program at Bessie.

EVERYONE CARED

At Canon Kip, everyone was a social worker, official or unofficial. Gene Coleman's formal degree from Findlay College in his home state of Ohio was a BA in Social Work. But titles didn't matter. The office manager did social work. The teen program staff did social work. The meal program staff and even the janitor did social work. Any staffer had time to listen to a senior or youth. If an elder missed lunch, someone would walk to their house and knock on the door to be sure they were okay. If a teen got mixed up with the police, Gene would go to Southern Station to help them out. If a family was in trouble, any kind, they could come to Canon Kip for help.

Then the Episcopal Diocese fired Gene



GENE COLEMAN

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POLITICS OF THE TIME

President Johnson's War On Poverty in the 1960s pioneered federal funding for important new central city programs. Canon Kip was the first location of the South of Market Health Clinic (now located near Seventh Street) and the Neighborhood Legal Assistance office (whose young attorneys then represented Yerba Buena residents against the Redevelopment Agency) — the all-too-effective legal advocate for poor people that Ronald Reagan made sure to neuter in 1981 in his first year as president because they had sued him successfully when he was governor.

Reagan's presidency also marked the appearance of widespread homelessness in American cities. It was a shock, and churches throughout the nation opened emergency shelters that first winter of 1982. As Bishop William Swing recalled years later: "The mayor of San Francisco [Diane Feinstein] asked Grace Cathedral to help with the 'temporary' and new problem of homelessness. On the first night we housed forty. On the second night, two hundred fifty. Today, one thousand one hundred fifty in eight locations. A vocation was born for us. Churches throughout the diocese followed suit and housed homeless." (The Swing Shift blog, Aug. 9, 2004, which actually spelled out all those numbers.)

That brief summary glides over a much more complicated true story. The Grace Cathedral basement shelter that brought homeless to the top of Nob Hill was quickly closed before the winter was even over, moving uncomfortably to a Pacific Heights parish. As the San Francisco Bay Guardian reprised events several months later:

"Coleman is something of an antagonist to Bishop Swing. When the Episcopal Church asked Canon Kip last October to move the church's 'sanctuary' program for the city's homeless into the Canon Kip building, Coleman refused ... and the church was forced to operate the program out of St. Mary's Church on Union Street.

"Only a few weeks later, after numerous complaints from St. Mary's neighbors, the church's board of trustees voted to close down the St. Mary's shelter and Swing came back ... this time, Coleman says, with an ultimatum. 'He came to the board meeting and basically said we could either take the homeless at Canon Kip or be cut off forever from the Church's financial support. That would have, of course, closed us down. So we took the homeless' ...

"And [Bishop Swing] has suggested, says

Coleman in 1983, closed Canon Kip in 1989 one year after its 100th anniversary, and finally tore the building down in 1992.

Canon Kip Settlement House was the second settlement house founded in the United States (soon followed in San Francisco by the Telegraph Hill Neighborhood Center) as part of a new movement of the 1880s to assist European immigrants of the era, the first modern-style "multi-purpose community center." With the end of most immigration after World War I and the "white flight" from the central cities

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Initially, his statements were restrained. In the November/December 1981 issue of Consumer Action News, he said: "The residents and merchants [of South of Market] understand how important it is to have access to the decision-making process, and they're frustrated at being constantly ignored by city planners and the Redevelopment Agency."

But as the political debate intensified, with his typical understated courage he publicly supported Prop. M. In South of Market News in April 1983, Coleman wrote: "We have our own vision. It is different from the visions and plans of the Redevelopment Agency and the developers. We have no choice but to put forth to the public, in a meaningful way, our own vision of the South of Market and the need to preserve the housing, jobs, small business, public transit, and traffic patterns that are conducive to saving and enhancing the neighborhood, not wiping it off the map."

During those years the United Way provided the largest portion of Canon Kip's funding. The Episcopal Diocese that held the deed of trust on the Canon Kip building actually provided very little financial support to it. So looking to increase alternate funding sources and start new community services as it had before, Canon Kip had set up the city's first senior paratransit service in 1979. For two years the city contract reimbursed all costs, but then — in the name of "cost effectiveness" — changed it to a per-ride payment. A businessman would have simply closed the program and laid off the staff, but Gene Coleman did not think like that, and in one year the program ran up a deficit of \$160,000 in payroll taxes due before he finally gave up hope and shut it down.

Converting the Canon Kip gym into an ad hoc shelter at the end of 1982 had already severely affected its community. The staff advised its board of directors in a Canon Kip flyer, June 1983: "The truth is the sanctuary has had a significant, negative impact on the other programs. The tutorial program's attendance has dropped over 60%. Recreation time to youth has been reduced by 30%. Many small children no longer come."

Now this "fiscal crisis" gave Bishop Swing an excuse to ask Gene and the entire Canon Kip board of directors to resign at a public board meeting. As the Examiner's Dexter Waugh reported that June: "Not many blocks separate Canon Kip Community House in the South of Market from Grace Cathedral atop Nob Hill, but distance cannot always be measured in city blocks. The Right Rev. William E. Swing's efforts to gain more control over the



The Leland Apartments at 960 Howard St. were named for feisty Canon Kip regular Lee Meyerzove, see inset.

PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

community organization ... ran up against staunch secular resistance yesterday.... The Episcopal bishop's proposal to step in and essentially take control of the agency, in exchange for the diocese bailing [it] out ... was called 'blackmail' and a 'scheme.'"

Bishop Swing never publicly objected to Coleman's activism, and one can only guess what issues he discussed with City Hall officials. But five months later, immediately after the Prop. M election, the Center's board of directors, now dominated by new members appointed by the bishop, fired Coleman, and only then did the diocese pay off the Canon Kip deficit.

Always a calming voice who never engaged in personal attacks, in the December 1983 South of Market News, Gene responded: "Canon Kip can go back to serving a very small, distinct population group, without any kind of concern for the bigger picture and the larger problems that we are facing in this community, like highrise office building, the eradication of affordable housing, human service programs closing almost daily, or the sale of the residential hotels on Sixth Street, where many of Canon Kip's clients reside, but these are all issues coming to the forefront."

KILLING IT SLOWLY

Which is exactly what happened. The gym was closed and converted to a full-time homeless shelter until today's Episcopal Sanctuary opened a block away in 1986. Canon Kip's youth programs were cut back and then dropped, leaving only the senior programs until the center finally closed its doors in 1989.

In 1992 the old building was demolished to provide a site for 105 units of new SRO low-income supportive housing for "dual-diagnosed" homeless, disingenuously keeping the name Canon Kip Community House. A small replacement senior center was rebuilt within its ground floor and continues in operation today. The gymnasium was functionally replaced by the city's new South of Market Recreation Center that opened at Sixth and

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Reminiscing

"There was a lot of spirit in those days"

MORE than a dozen of Gene Coleman's friends gathered in a spacious room at the eponymous Eugene Coleman Community House one Friday afternoon in December to remember the man who played a major social role in SoMa as director of Canon Kip Community House and a co-founder of TODCO, the nonprofit, affordable housing builder.

Coleman died Oct. 19 of pancreatic cancer. He was 70. A 26-by-30-inch color photo of Coleman in a gray suit and beaming under a fetching white fedora rested on an easel, reminding friends of his vitality and hard work at Canon Kip in 1965-85 that helped make SoMa a vibrant, diverse community.

"He was too young (to pass)," said John Elberling, TODCO executive director who planned the get-together. "But he didn't exactly lead a temperate life."

John Behanna, a Canon Kip board member 1985-90, and a former president, said he first met the charismatic Coleman one night in a cigar-smoke-filled room where he was playing poker.

"I never knew he was a founder of TODCO," Behanna said. "I had no idea he was so competent."

"There was a lot of spirit in those days," Elberling said. "Canon Kip was a hub of activity. There's no spirit now. The Bayanihan (hotel, which TODCO built) has revived it for the Philippine community, though."

As the friends grazed on a spread of salami, chicken, shrimp and an assortment of dips and drinks, the reminiscing invariably turned to politics then and now, housing, the changing neighborhood, shifting social patterns, undernourished neighborhood community centers and how hard people have to work to stay in the city.

Coleman left behind a SoMa community that's trying to retain chunks of a vibrant past he helped create, and in a demanding climate.

"Do you know that San Francisco has the highest per capita income of any metropolitan area?" Behanna asked.

"It's the worst time for the underclass," Elberling said. "And the middle class has to work harder and harder." ■

—TOM CARTER



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

The Isabel Hotel at the corner of Mission and Seventh streets was named for SoMa stalwart Isabel Ugat, see inset.