

FRANK TRANTHAM
'A memorable guy'

In the Faithful Fools' meditation room on Hyde Street, five Tenderloin health providers gathered Feb. 19 to remember a man who taught them to look beyond the obvious in their clients.

Frank Trantham had been homeless for many years when Abigail Kahn, outreach case manager for DPH's Homeless Outreach Team, met him at Hospitality House's shelter.

"I got him placed in a stabilization room at the Columbia Hotel while we tried to find him permanent housing," Kahn said. "His health problems were severe — he was an insulin-dependent diabetic, had been hospitalized and had three strokes before he died."

Kahn found Mr. Trantham dead in his Columbia room Jan. 24, only six months after he moved in. He was 44 years old.

Permanent housing hadn't been far off. Not long ago, Kahn took him to the Empress Hotel for an interview about becoming a resident there.

"He charmed everyone he met at the Empress with his jokes," Kahn said. "As we were leaving, he asked me, 'Do you think they liked me?' I said, 'Yes, they did.' Then he told me, 'This is the kind of place where I'd be glad to have my father visit me.'"

Mr. Trantham grew up in Louisiana and had stayed in touch with family members still living there, including his father.

Most of the patients that Barry Zevin sees as a doctor specializing in addiction medicine at the Tom Waddell Health Center have stopped communicating with their families, but not Mr. Trantham, Zevin said at the memorial.

"It didn't sound like things were always smooth between Frank and his family, but still, they were at the center of who he was and where he was. He talked about his father, a bandleader, and a nephew who was in the military service."

Zevin remembered Mr. Trantham as a man with a strong regional accent who gave most medical professionals "a run for their money" and who made his dislike for doctors clear the first time they met.

"But he told me that I compared favorably with the town doctor where he grew up, and that he did like him."

Zevin saw Mr. Trantham frequently, treating him not only for his many health problems but also for anxiety as he tried to figure out how he'd wound up where he was — "someplace where he was happy to be, but that also was a pretty bad place," Zevin said. "He was a stoic about his illness but fearful of medical care. And he lived in San Francisco like it was a small town; he knew lots of people and sold things on the street, like shoes, to make some money."

Gina Limon, his registered nurse, saw him daily and says that while he was cross with her sometimes, he always stood up for her, yelling at people who appeared to be disrespecting her. "It only took a week after I started caring for him to tell me I was a 'Frank-friendly' person," Limon said. "He was a memorable guy for everyone."

When Kahn and Jason Albertson, Homeless Outreach Team social worker, went to Mr. Trantham's room after he died, they found a set of golf clubs, golf shoes and candy-striped button-down shirts in his closet.

"That really taught me that things are not always what they seem," said Albertson. ■

—MARJORIE BEGGS

RUDOLPH PRICE
Sang with Patti Labelle

That popular Rudolph Price had a starry page in his past came as a surprise to a dozen of his friends who gathered Feb. 22 for his memorial at the Lyric Hotel.

"He played guitar and sang with Patti Labelle in his younger days and he had a good voice," said Steve Moriarty, an S.F. General Hospital high-risk caseworker.

"Oh, he was charming, but I didn't know he was almost famous," said one woman.

"I didn't know he was a musician," said a man who had known Mr. Price for two years.

The Philadelphia-born Labelle went on to fame and fortune as a singer and actress. Mr. Price's road was much different and he leaves no music behind, as far as Moriarty knows.

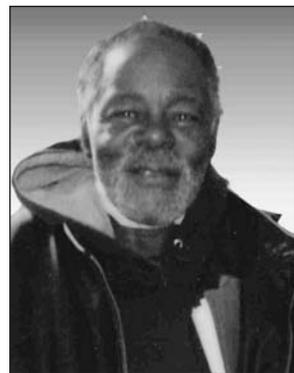
What had made Mr. Price a prince among his Lyric friends, though, was his sparkling personality and glittering smile, even as he fought kidney disease. They said Mr. Price was a "character," tooling down the sidewalk in his motorized maroon wheelchair, wearing his matching fuzzy hat, leaning to

one side like he was driving a car, playfully offering the ladies a ride in his "Cadillac."

Mr. Price lived in rough-and-tumble Baltimore projects and had two daughters by two wives before leaving on his own 30 years ago for the Bay Area music scene. He had nephews and nieces in Oakland.

But music didn't pan out for Mr. Price. He was homeless for eight years and living under the freeway when he came to S.F. General where Moriarty helped him get medical treatment, SSI and other benefits.

Mr. Price started kidney dialysis treatments three times a week and received a wheelchair. Moriarty got him into the Lyric Hotel in June where he immediately became popular.



"He was grateful for all the people who helped him along the way, too," Moriarty said in front of a table laden with bouquets, a few photos and candles. "Part of our goal for his recovery was to get a guitar in his hands. But his hands started freezing up a year ago from his medical condition."

Mr. Price was found dead in his second floor room on Feb. 10 during a room check. He was 63, Labelle's age. The medical examiner's office said the cause of death wouldn't be determined for a month.

"He was just a very nice man," said one man from the back. "He had a wonderful smile and treated everyone with respect."

"He was joyful, I loved the guy," said Gordon Grant, his case worker. "And he loved women. When any would come into a room — they could be 70 years old — he'd just light up. He didn't like to talk about his past, though, just surface talk."

The long hospital dialysis treatments made him very weak, Grant said. "Sometimes he wouldn't go. And when he did things that ruffled my feathers, I had to admonish him. But he was willing to approach change."

"He was like a big brother to me. His dream was to visit his daughters in Baltimore. But that didn't happen."

Joy Harvey, a senior case manager, had gotten a big frame for a small photo of Mr. Price. It was propped up on the table between the bouquets and written on it was "In loving memory, Rudolph Price, Friend, Neighbor, Wonderful Soul, You will be missed." His daughter Michelle, in Baltimore, couldn't attend but sent her picture inscribed with "Goodbye Daddy," which Moriarty had placed on the table.

A crew in the adjacent kitchen had fixed sandwiches for everyone.

"We try to make our goodbyes as nice as possible," Harvey said. ■

—TOM CARTER

HARVEY WHITLOCK
Investment banker

Harvey Whitlock was a former Wall Street investment banker. White-haired and maybe 5-foot-8 and 100 pounds, he was polite and never swore. He was sensitive and had a sense of humor, too. And he earned respect and affection at the Ambassador Hotel where he lived for nearly five years.

But Mr. Whitlock had his demons. They led him to drink and, in the last year of his life, drugs.

He was found Jan. 29 in his room on the sixth floor. He had been dead two days, social workers said. Cause of death was unknown. Mr. Whitlock was 60.

"He was very polite and easy to get along with, when he wasn't battling demons," said Cecil Baker at Mr. Whitlock's Feb. 4 memorial where a half dozen mourners gathered in the hotel's Listening Post room. Baker lived across the hall from Mr. Whitlock.

"I'd ask him about a stock — but I don't have any — and he'd say, 'Don't buy that shit, it's fantasy.' It'd make him mad."

"I worked with him 4½ years," said social worker Rachel Throm. "He was a nice guy."

"A gentle presence," someone said. "People were important to him."

But sometimes Mr. Whitlock wandered out at night and got beat up on the street.

"He'd end up with the most horrible black eyes," Baker said.

Baker talked to Mr. Whitlock several times a week and learned that in the last year he had turned to speed.

"It's amazing what we remember of him is all positive," Baker said. ■

—TOM CARTER

JAMES WILLIAMS
Cambridge Hotel desk clerk

James Williams, a former Maritime Museum employee, was a well-read Tenderloin intellectual who charmed people with his knowledge and inspired them to read and learn.

He was a desk clerk at the Cambridge Hotel for the past 17 years, until he got too sick to work. In his friendly way he bent people's ears coming and going through the lobby, about history and music and other subjects close to his heart. Some reverently called him Mr. Williams. Alabama-born, he referred to himself simply as "a Southern gentleman."

After a long battle with cancer, Mr. Williams died Jan. 12 at Kaiser Hospital. He was 65.

On Feb. 1, 40 mourners filled the Cambridge Hotel's community room to capacity for his memorial, spilling outside where a dozen stood in the lobby. The unusually large turnout was a tribute to Mr. Williams' kindness and impact on others, said the Rev. Glenda Hope, who conducted.

On a small easel next to her were a dozen photos showing him as a toddler and, in uniform, his dad, who had been killed in World War II, and boat sketches that Mr. Williams liked.

"I've been here 12½ years and I learned so much from him," said an older man.

"He was like a professor," said one woman.

"He loved IMAX 3-D movies and documentaries but only good ones," said longtime friend Walter Lilly who now lives at the Columbia Hotel. "He felt ripped off if they were inferior and dramatized like a Hollywood movie."

"When he found out I liked to read he'd give me three or four books a week!" another woman exclaimed, raising a laugh. "But I couldn't read that much."

The mourners recalled Mr. Williams' love of Southern food, his "calming ways" and many kindnesses: taking a resident out for a steak on her birthday and insisting she order the most expensive one; taking a friend during Fleet Week to see the Blue Angels and explaining aerodynamics; taking friends to Davies Symphony Hall to hear classical music, but not the modern stuff, which he hated.

Mr. Williams' former wife, Janet Cydel of Larkspur, and their son, Michael, and daughter, Chandra, attended and talked with his friends after the memorial. She and Mr. Williams had met at Ohio State and came to California in the 1960s, hoping to get into UC Berkeley, his "fourth or fifth college." She got in; he went to San Francisco State. He never got a degree, she said.

Mr. Williams came from a large Alabama family, she said, and became "the only one" without a Southern accent. They were divorced after 10 years. He had "a lot of demons," she said, mainly alcohol.

He worked for the Maritime Museum in the 1970s. Once, when on the Balclutha deck, he jumped into the bay and saved a stranger who had fallen over the railing.

Mr. Williams beat a brain tumor in 1996 and stopped drinking. But his cancer battles continued until a more aggressive form put him back in the hospital in late December. He died there two weeks later. ■

—TOM CARTER

