

STEVE CONLEY
Community activist, radio pro

If ever a voice could speak for the Tenderloin it was Steve Conley's.

His measured, rich baritone and the trademark dark beret he wore were familiar at community meetings, neighborhood summits and at City Hall where he weighed in on civil rights, quality of life, and homeless issues. As an activist on many community organization boards, he interrogated or championed a populist cause with polish and style. Sharply intelligent, gentle, and sometimes intense but never overbearing, he was a pro.

The multitasking Mr. Conley was in the radio business 20 years and a TL activist for a decade. And, in his colorful past, he was a musician who had backed up Stevie Wonder and Patti Labelle.

With half a dozen neighborhood friends at his side, he died Jan. 23 in Veterans Hospital of cancer. He was 58.

Ironically, at the end Mr. Conley communicated in writing because he was too devastated by his disease to speak. Retired priest Daniel O'Conner said at Mr. Conley's March 3 memorial that when he asked him if he was religious and wanted last rites, Mr. Conley added yet another distinction to the many hats he wore in his life: "altar boy," he wrote.

O'Connor told the story in the community room at 150 Golden Gate, the new St. Anthony Foundation building where 75 celebrants and city officials including Supervisor Daly and TL Capt. Gary Jimenez paid their respects. The Board of Supervisors and the state Senate both had adjourned in Mr. Conley's memory Feb. 3. The next day, as an Army veteran of the Vietnam War, Mr. Conley was buried with Honor Guard services at the Sacramento Valley National Cemetery.

"He had a gentle, caring voice," said Adrienne Lauby, who worked with him at KPFA. "And he led a wonderfully useful life."

Mr. Conley was known for his love of democracy and his ability to get groups and individuals to work together. A high point in his life was in October 2002 when he co-produced with Michael Nulty, and then directed and moderated, the Tenant Leadership Summit. It was a KPFA, live four-hour feed from 201 Turk St. It brought together 40 community organizations and attracted 125 residents who had attended a monthlong series of workshops on their critical issues. Then they spoke of them on radio at the summit. In 2004, Mr. Conley and Nulty did a repeat at the Blue Cube on Mason Street.

"He was the idea guy, I was the organizer," Nulty said after the memorial. "We used our connections, but it was a six-month process (to create) both. It was an idea that had to be promoted, and he was the voice of the people."

Mr. Conley co-founded with Nulty the Alliance for a Better District 6 and Central City Democrats and was a board member. He also served on the North of Market Planning Coalition and the Tenderloin Community Benefits District boards and was media director for Tenant Associations Coalition.

Mr. Conley also moderated the first 2007 mayoral debate. One mourner recalled how skillfully he could handle difficult guests to maintain order and decorum.

A dozen people spoke at the memorial, several from Pacifica radio, owner of KPFA in Oakland and KPFA in Los Angeles, stations where Mr. Conley worked. Chandra Hauptman read a tribute signed by 11 KPFA co-workers that summarized his career.

"He respected everyone's right to have their say," Hauptman said. "He spoke and wrote forcefully, with an air of self confidence, and encouraged others to do the same. We will greatly miss his presence and his originality."

Mr. Conley attended Pierce Junior College in Winnetka in the mid-1980s and Cal State Northridge 1988-90 as a journalism major with a minor in theater arts. He worked as a freelance correspondent in Asia, the Middle East and Europe covering human rights, economics, social movements and war during a break after joining KPFA in Los Angeles in 1992 and completing its apprentice program.

KPFA made him public affairs production coordinator. He also produced and directed "Morning Magazine" and created the probing "Beneath the Surface," a popular program that's still aired. His programs ranged from a national broadcast of the second Rodney King verdict to live coverage in Germany of the fall of the Berlin Wall to a series on human rights in conjunction with Amnesty International.

When Mr. Conley moved to the Bay Area in 2000 his activism and KPFA work began immediately. That year he received a commendation from the



Board of Supervisors for his outreach to multiethnic communities in developing new supervisorial district boundaries. His main job at KPFA was to get the station involved in diverse communities. He was also a computer expert who knew graphics programs but sold software for network security and storage.

At the time, he was involved with a West Oakland community performing arts venue called The Noodle Factory that had live-work studios. He divided his time between Oakland and the Tenderloin.

Mr. Conley was from Philadelphia. Before coming West after his Army discharge, Mr. Conley had compiled a history as a musician and actor. His resume lists nine plays and the characters he played, including Andre in "My Dinner with Andre" and Morris in Neil Simon's "God's Favorite." But no dates or sites are given. As a musician he listed the major venues where he performed — Carnegie Hall, Madison Square Garden and Radio City Music Hall among them. He also wrote plays and poems.

To the side of the community room, on a table with a bouquet and candles, some of Mr. Conley's personal effects were displayed: the American flag that Nulty, as Mr. Conley's executor, received from the Defense Department at the interment, a stack of Tarot cards, a harmonica and casaba — a rhythm instrument.

"He played many instruments," musician Per Marshall said, picking up the casaba and shaking it before the memorial began. "I knew him in Philadelphia in the neighborhood. He was our hero. He gave me music lessons and really encouraged me. He came out to California before I did but he went to L.A. I came here."

Marshall said Mr. Conley played in Patti Labelle's Brooklyn band in the 1970s and was backup for Stevie Wonder, too. On Marshall's "Night birds" CD Mr. Conley played on "Lady Marmalade," a song about a New Orleans hooker. And Mr. Conley co-wrote "Traveler" on Marshall's "For the Journey" CD.

Marshall later played guitar for the crowd and sang Mr. Conley's composition "Love Will Lead Us," which he had often accompanied on harmonica. Jim Meko, entertainment commissioner and chair of the Western SoMa Advisory Task Force, read this poem that Mr. Conley wrote:

*One person's struggle is shared,
one person's success is heartfelt,
one person's kiss is our loss,
one person's determination inspires us all.*

*We must believe in the one's,
we must believe in the whole,
each person adds to the foundation,
if for only a moment.*

*We should all aspire
with the success of the whole,
then we can all succeed
as one.*

"He was a friend who fought against war and homelessness," Nulty said. "He was passionate. His ego was in his heart."

Mourners were treated to pizza and beverages. An Irish wake with door prizes and entertainment was held March 19 at the Swig Bar, 561 Geary St. to celebrate Mr. Conley's lifetime achievements. Donations for his memorial fund were requested.

Soon Nulty expected Mr. Conley's marble tombstone would be set on his grave in Sacramento bearing the inscription: "A voice of the people." ■

—TOM CARTER

DAVID BERRY
Enjoyed creating art works

Two things stood out about David Berry, a resident of the Lyric Hotel on Jones Street, who died Feb. 20: He had an artistic streak and a great imagination.

The Rev. Glenda Hope led a joint memorial service March 6 for Mr. Berry and another Lyric resident who died recently in unrelated circumstances.

A Lyric staff member talked about work Mr. Berry created during weekly art sessions. "He had his issues, but he will always be remembered through the work he did," she said.

"David always had a thing about crystals," another staff member recalled. "He had a fantastic imagination about entering crystals. I could listen to him for hours."

None of the handful of people who attended the service could provide details about Mr. Berry. Staff members said privacy issues prevented them from discussing his life, and fellow residents noted that he kept to himself most of the time.

After the service, two residents struggled to recall specifics. "He was a very nice person," one man said. "We spoke every day, and he would always ask if I needed anything."

Another resident said that Mr. Berry, who was born in 1961, died of unknown causes at a San Francisco hospital. "He had a mental disability," he said. "I think he neglected himself."

One of them noted Mr. Berry's resemblance to actor Burt Lancaster. "He does look like Lancaster," the other chuckled.

"David had a lot of burdens he struggled with," he added. "I think he's in a better place." ■

—HEIDI SWILLINGER



TERRY JEAN HICKS
Loved to cook

It was standing-room-only at the memorial service for Terry Jean Hicks, who died Feb. 25 in her room at the Coast Hotel on O'Farrell Street. Nearly a dozen family members joined staff and residents in the hotel's community room for a service led by the Rev. Glenda Hope.

Mourners remembered Ms. Hicks as a big-hearted woman who loved to eat and cook. "She'd never let anyone go hungry," said one Coast resident, who recalled how Ms. Hicks helped him regain a job he'd lost.

"She had a heart larger than the North American continent," another tenant said. "Her death hit us all like a freight train."

Ms. Hicks' body was discovered by an exterminator who had come to the hotel to do routine pest control. The cause of death is still undetermined, said her daughter, Sherece Cooks. She was 54.

A flyer distributed at the service described Ms. Hicks, an Oakland native, as "a free-spirited woman who faced and conquered many challenges in life." Cooks said her mother began using drugs at an early age and was never able to wean herself from them, despite several attempts. As a result, Cooks was raised by her grandparents, and she wasn't always able to be close to her mother. "I distanced myself," said Cooks. "If I didn't agree with her lifestyle, she'd be mad."

Still, Ms. Hicks kept in touch with her daughter, as well as her son, Carlos Flagg. She'd spoken with both the week she died. Cooks said she was troubled because she wasn't able to fulfill her mother's last request — Ms. Hicks had asked her to come by with some pork chops, but Cooks said she couldn't because she'd be late for school.

"I feel bad about that," she said.

Cooks said her mother had been diagnosed with lung cancer in December and had been in and out of the hospital for treatment. She'd also recently been hit by a car and had fractured her pelvis. "She wasn't taking care of herself like she should," Cooks said.

She noted that the Coast Hotel had been a good place for Ms. Hicks. "You guys were her family," she said. "She talked a lot about the residents here. Thank you for being there for her."

One tenant returned the sentiment, thanking Ms. Hicks' family members for attending the service. "We all don't always have that option," he said. ■

—HEIDI SWILLINGER

