

LORETTA FLORENCE PHILLIPS
Activist wife of Tenderloin activist

Loretta Florence Phillips, one of the Alexander Residence's longest-residing tenants, overcame a crippling childhood and conquered alcoholism to eventually find peace and stability in the Tenderloin.

Mrs. Phillips began life in New Orleans in 1922 with two strikes against her. She was born with polio, and her mother died in childbirth. The devastating viral infection that put people in leg braces and iron lungs knew no class. It also afflicted opera star Renata Tibaldi in 1922 and Franklin Delano Roosevelt the year before.

"Her father gave her up to a convent," said Marvis Phillips, her husband, after her Nov. 13 memorial at the Alexander, where she lived more than 30 years. "But she was determined to walk as a little girl — and she did. She never had to have braces."

The plucky Mrs. Phillips rebounded from other misfortune as a youngster.

Mr. Phillips said the father reclaimed her at age 6 and moved to Chicago.

"Her father raped her when she was 13 and she had a child," Phillips said. "Then the father kicked her out when she was 18 and she was homeless in Chicago before they had adequate welfare. The authorities took her child away and she never saw her child again."

No details of Mrs. Phillips' life came to light during the memorial conducted by Father Armando Lopez of St. Boniface Catholic Church. More than 60 attended. Songs were sung and prayers said, but mourners weren't offered the opportunity to speak



Loretta Florence Phillips

of their affection for Mrs. Phillips, who died Nov. 6 at California Pacific Medical Center after a long illness. She was 87.

Mrs. Phillips had been an active member of the North of Market Planning Coalition and the Alexander Tenants Association, and she was a charter member of the Central City Democrats and a founding member of Alliance for a Better District 6. At meetings, she was a familiar sight at her activist husband's side. Once homeless, she was avidly interested in the Tenderloin Homeless Caucus.

Her husband doesn't know when Mrs. Phillips arrived in California. He knew that when he met her she had been married three times and was an alcoholic. He believes her wakeup call came while doing six months in jail for being drunk and kicking a policeman in the groin. She then quit through Alcoholics Anonymous and was sober for 25 years — until she died.

Marvis Phillips met his future wife in the Alexander lobby in 1992 when he was a new resident. The older woman came over and sat next to him and they struck up a conversation. It became a daily routine. Over months, they grew closer. He asked her to help him kick his drug habit, and she did.

"She was a certified drug rehabilitation counselor through AA," he said. "She showed me there was another way."

In March 1996, he went downstairs to the lobby and tapped her on the shoulder. When she turned around he got down on one knee and proposed.

"She was Mrs. Herron then," he said. "She said yes."

They were married two weeks later, March 19, 1996, in City Hall. The late Tenderloin police Sgt. Kenneth Sugrue, for whom the Civic Center children's park is named, was best man.

Marvis Phillips was with his wife when she died at the hospital. She was on a respirator and could not speak but her eyes fluttered open when he was at her side.

"I held her hand," he said. "She looked at me and she mouthed the words, 'I love you.' And then she was gone." ■

—TOM CARTER

JOHN MELONE
A tireless force for seniors

For a man who publicly pushed as hard as he could for others, especially seniors, John Melone kept an exceptionally low personal profile. When he died Oct. 8 at a hospice in Richmond, the Contra Costa County Coroner's Office could find no relatives. Neither could staff at Canon Kip in San Francisco, where he had been first a client, then a volunteer for many years.

At the Nov. 12 memorial for Mr. Melone at Universal Unitarian Church, speaker after speaker praised his tenacity and feistiness in advocating for senior housing and health care rights. Personal anecdotes were spare.

"John just didn't talk about himself," said Hene Kelly, board member of Senior Action Network and the California Alliance for Retired Americans. "But he did the job of many. You can be sure, John will not rest in peace. He's an organizer, so you can enjoy yourself when you get there. He fought for all of us."

Mr. Melone, a Vietnam vet, was 74 when he died from complications of liver cancer and brain cancer.

More than 50 people gathered in the modern, airy church community room for the memorial, which began with music from the Canon Kip Senior Band and introductions by the Rev. Glenda Hope of S.F. Network Ministries and Zen Buddhist priest Jana, who co-officiated.

"John was a friend of mine, a political ally, one of the first volunteers for our computer center 15 years ago," Hope said. "It was John who had the idea that we should have seniors-only time at the center, and he helped people fix their computers."

Mr. Melone had come through "some tough stuff — homelessness and painful illnesses," Hope said later. "He could be a curmudgeon sometimes, clashing with clients, but he was someone you could always talk to. He was a voice for the voiceless."

Mr. Melone also spent hours at the computer at Senior Action Network, where he was an activist for 10 years and a board member for five. He tracked senior-related legislation rigorously, sending copious email messages and complicated legislative attachments to fellow activists.

"We fought a lot," said Jodi Reid, executive director of Northern California Alliance for Retired Americans. "This man was stubborn and that's what made him so committed. He forced me to figure out his legislative summaries and Excel spreadsheets." And, she said, for that she thanked him.

Barbara Blong, Senior Action Network executive director, called Mr. Melone "a force to be reckoned with. It was John who put us on the map."

People's remembrances were filled with pugilistic motifs.

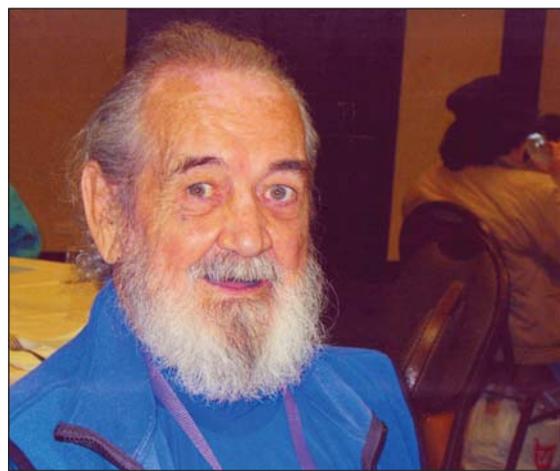
"John was a fighter — I'd see him every day at SAN, checking his computer to see what was going on in Sacramento," said James Chionsini, Planning for Elders health care action team member. "He was one of those people who came out swinging and never stopped. He's probably up there organizing right now."

As a Senior Action Network board member, Mr. Melone represented SAN at South of Market Project Area Committee, which advises the Redevelopment Agency.

SOMPAC Parliamentarian Raymon Smith called Mr. Melone "a true warrior, a sincere man who walked the walk and brought invaluable insights." Smith sang a few bars from the song "Kansas City," which he said reminded him of how Mr. Melone tackled issues: "I might take a train, I might take a plane, but if I have to walk, I'm goin' just the same."

"John got to meetings however he could," Smith added. "He never accepted that something couldn't be done."

Others besides seniors benefited from Mr. Melone's hard work at SOMPAC. Alex Torres, executive director of Bindlestiff Studio, attended the memorial to honor the memory of Mr. Melone. Torres credits him with helping Bindlestiff, the 10-year-old performance company of emerging Pilipino and Filipino American artists, get a permanent home



John Melone

in the Plaza Apartments at Sixth and Howard streets.

"John was fair when considering Bindlestiff," Torres said. "He didn't just give us a pass — he asked good questions, and when he understood us, he supported us."

Another part of Mr. Melone's life came to light through Michael Lyon, who said they met at S.F. General Hospital when Lyon was a medical equipment repairman. "John was a social worker in the AIDS clinic and other places in the hospital — he seemed to be everywhere and always active," Lyon said. "I'll miss his sense of urgency."

San Francisco was just one base for Mr. Melone's activism. A Richmond resident for many years, he earned kudos for his Contra Costa County work on behalf of seniors and, after he died, a commendation from the county Board of Supervisors, which Arnie Kasendorf, chairman of the Richmond Commission on Aging and president of the Richmond AARP, read aloud at the memorial.

San Francisco and state officials weighed in, too, to remember Mr. Melone.

"He was a gift to our city, especially to those who are struggling and those who have the least," Supervisor Chris Daly told the mourners at the memorial. "He was a real hero of those without anything."

Hene Kelly read a California Assembly tribute to Mr. Melone, signed by Tom Ammiano, and a Senate certificate of recognition signed by Mark Leno. "John loved tracking their legislation — for health, housing, benefits — and they appreciated him," she said.

Kelly also introduced David Phillips, whom Mr. Melone met 28 years ago in San Francisco: "When David was struggling with drugs and was homeless, John invited David to come live with him and found him a job at the Chronicle," she said. "Later, when Mr. Melone was homeless himself, David invited him to live with him in Richmond."

She described a tiny computer flash drive that she carries in her purse, a gift from Phillips to her after Mr. Melone's death. He wore the drive, which holds a huge collection of legislation files, on a lanyard around his neck so he'd have access to the information as he moved from computer to computer.

"I also have some of John's ashes," Kelly said. "I think I'll place some of them where John always tried, but never managed, to get in — in Sen. Feinstein's and Gov. Schwarzenegger's offices." ■

—MARJORIE BEGGS

LUKE SMITH
Elm Hotel's happiest resident

Luke Smith's daughter broke into tears two years ago when she chanced upon her father, who she hadn't seen since she was 11 years old, walking near Boeddeker Park.

At 28, Gloria Smith got her father back. And Mr. Smith, as his health later deteriorated, got a loving caretaker for months — until he died.

But it was hard to say by looking at him whether Mr. Smith was any happier after their chance meeting. He was a rare person with the gift of happiness; he was forever smiling.

Gloria Smith said at her father's Nov. 3 memorial that he had left the family of six, all living together in the Tenderloin, in the early 1980s. There had been no contact with him and his whereabouts were unknown. Several family members live outside of the city now, she said.

After the reunion, the father and daughter saw each other "off and on," Ms. Smith said. It was only after Mr. Smith's health seriously declined, when he was making three hospital trips a week for kidney dialysis treatments, that she began to care for him

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