

JOSEPH JACKSON
Activist, SEIU janitor

When someone commented on Joe Jackson's faithful attendance at Coast Hotel memorials — as the Rev. Glenda Hope once did — he'd quip:

"If you don't go to your friends' funerals, they won't come to yours." It amused Mr. Jackson to quote the Yogi Berra paradox, tongue-in-cheek.

Memorials were close to Mr. Jackson's heart. Before one a few months ago, he distributed copies of two Central City Extra obits on the SRO's Care Not Cash residents. He had asked the newspaper's permission and said he believed in the dignity the obits bestowed on the have-nots. He had been the first to encourage memorials at the Coast.

Such was the sensitivity of a man who was something of a paradox himself. As a promising English graduate student, articulate and mannerly, he later chose a janitorial career and became a life-long activist to improve conditions for the worker and the poor.

Mr. Jackson died Dec. 9 of heart problems at S.F. General, where he had been hospitalized 3½ months. He was 70.

Mr. Jackson lived at the Coast for 24 years, longer than any resident. He assumed the guardianship of the SRO and its formerly homeless tenants while he took on other community issues, attended neighborhood meetings and advocated at City Hall hearings.

"I know if he were here today — and I feel he is — he'd want to quote Joe Hill — 'Don't mourn, organize,'" said Joan Jackson, his former wife.

She was among 20 mourners, including the Jacksons' 40-year old son Neil, who sat in a semicircle in the community room Dec. 23 remembering the passionate Mr. Jackson. When Mrs. Jackson said she had worried about Joe's eating habits, one woman assured her that she made sure he ate a good meal every day. Another said he was crazy about her meatloaf.

"Oh, I'm thankful," Mrs. Jackson said. "But he didn't take care of himself and that's why he's not with us now."

Mr. Jackson was born and raised in Pasadena and met his future wife when he came to school in

San Francisco. "I knew him 50 years," Mrs. Jackson said, "and we discovered the city together. Oh, it was so much fun. And he was an incredibly smart guy."

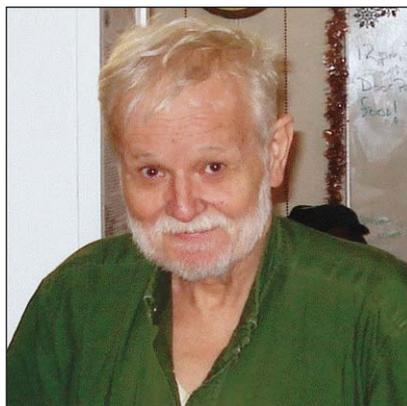
She passed around a photo of him taken in his parents' backyard in Pasadena when he was 21, just before he came to the city. The mourners marveled at his good looks.

In the mid- and late-1960s Mr. Jackson went to City College — growing his activist beard in 1964 — then to San Francisco State where he earned a B.A. in history. His professors encouraged him to pursue creative writing in graduate school, which he did, as a teaching assistant. By then he was immersed in political issues.

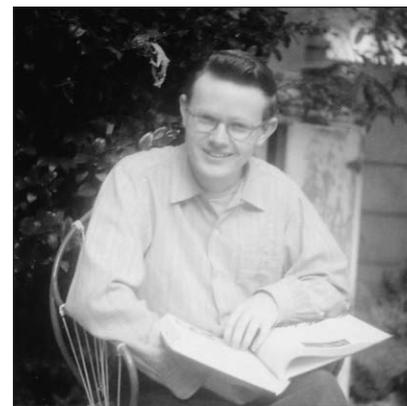
On Aug. 28, 1968, he was in Chicago's Grant Park with 10,000 demonstrators during the Democratic National Convention. Thousands of police charged in, clubbing, gassing and arresting Yippies. Mrs. Jackson watched the television news fearfully. But her young husband wasn't bashed or carted off to jail and the experience, she said, became "a high point in his life." In November, she was glued to the radio during the 1968 S.F. State student strike over the need for diversity. But Mr. Jackson, then a graduate student and strike leader, eluded jail again. His labor friends said later the experience turned him into a lifelong activist.

Mr. Jackson soon dropped out of school and took a job as a janitor. He became an activist in SEIU Local 87. Mrs. Jackson became a librarian in Mill Valley. Her husband was an indefatigable speaker and champion of leafleting. Unhappy with the leadership, his enthusiasms led him to form a dissident rank-and-file group called Workers for a Strong Union. It got him temporarily kicked out of the union.

Another memorial for Mr. Jackson was held in the 240 Golden Gate Ave. union hall a week earlier,



Joseph Jackson, 70



Joseph Jackson, at age 21.

FAMILY PHOTO

his widow said, and his old cronies assembled to remember the fiery labor leader.

Tenderloin Housing Clinic, too, planned a memorial Jan. 21. Mr. Jackson had gone to Sacramento with the nonprofit group to protest Life Line telephone costs, his wife said.

After coming to the Coast Hotel, Mr. Jackson was known for keeping abreast of political topics affecting the residents. He could scarcely wait to launch into the issues with anyone who would listen, they said. Several residents said they learned from him. "Yes," said one man, "we gotta stick together. He kept saying that. He was a pleasant soul and politically motivated. He could light up and spark a dialogue."

Support Services Manager Scott Ecker said Mr. Jackson was suspicious of him when Episcopal Community Services began its staffing at the hotel, "until he realized we were all on the same page. Then we were fine."

In a final paradox, Mr. Jackson became a new man in the hospital.

"They shaved off his beard and cut his hair," his wife said. "His son had never seen him without a beard — and I fell in love with him all over again."

Mrs. Jackson remained afterward, talking to residents and fitting faces to the names her husband had mentioned during her hospital visits. ■

—TOM CARTER

JAMES GOMBOS
Not what he seemed

In the Padre Apartments basement are a laundry room, a management office, a comfortable common room with a small kitchen, and, at the end of the hall, an apartment. That's where James Gombos lived for seven years and where he died Nov. 19. He was 70.

Ten people gathered in the common room Dec. 3 to remember their friend and neighbor — a man, they all said, who worked hard to look and sound gruff in order to cover up gentleness and the sense of humor underneath.

"Like a jelly bean," is how Sister Lorna Walsh, Mercy Housing community operations manager for the 41-unit Padre, described him. "Soft and delicious inside and crackly and hard outside."



James Gombos looked and sounded gruff, but wasn't.

"It's strange to be down here without him, to think of him being gone," said Jennifer Fu, one of two resident services coordinators at the Padre, an apartment building on Jones just south of the Tenderloin police station. "He took care of the plants out back and always checked to make sure the property was secure. He could be grumpy and harsh, but he was sweet under that tough exterior."

Resident Charles Dobson said that every time he came down to do his laundry, Mr. Gombos, who could hear the washer running, stopped in at least twice.

"First he'd stick his head in to say hello, then come by another time to talk more," Dobson said. "If he liked you, he'd express what was ailing him — and you'd try to help him iron out his problems. I think he really liked the camaraderie of this place."

Gombos almost lost his apartment. A year ago, he was frying potatoes and set the place on fire, gutting it. Walsh said she spent months "fighting for his rights" so he could return to his refurbished apartment, and she won. "Without that, he might not have made it back. He wasn't that aggressive, but we wanted him back here."

Bingo at the Padre was among Mr. Gombos' favorite activities. "He was so happy when he won

and so very angry when he lost," recalled Michael Cooper, the other resident services coordinator.

Cooper said that despite Mr. Gombos' increasing debility, he spent hours at the Kroc Center computer lab.

Ed Evans, who has lived at the Padre since 1992, said he was with Mr. Gombos when he died. Evans called their relationship "special." Mr. Gombos would just walk into his apartment to chat. If he wasn't feeling well, Evans would shop for him.

"He'd come to me and say, 'I have a problem.' Then he'd ask, 'How should I handle this sweepstakes mailer?'" Evans said. "We teased each other a lot, and I worked at getting past the gruff exterior. There'll be a hole in my life now."

For the memorial, Cooper read a passage from Seneca, the Roman philosopher and statesman:

"In the presence of death, we must continue to sing the song of life. . . . Let us not be gripped by the fear of death. If another day be added to our lives, let us joyfully receive it, but let us not anxiously depend on our tomorrows. . . . Let us make the best of our loved ones while they are with us, and let us not bury our love with death." ■

—MARJORIE BEGGS

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