

‘The TL is not the best place to get old in. But what can I do about it?’

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gy had gone, and there were behavior issues.”
When the Aarti was being renovated in 1994, Duffy found a room at the five-story Ritz, 216 Ellis St., also a TNDC property. He’s been there since. His third-floor room, with bathroom, had been reserved for a disabled person but the deal fell through and Duffy got it.
The Ritz had a community kitchen on the mezzanine, recently renovated. But over the years it hasn’t been the oasis Duffy wanted. The cooperative spirit is missing, and utensils left behind disappear and often people don’t clean up after themselves.

The thefts in the hotel may not be the residents’ sticky fingers, Duffy suggests, but their guests and the people who sneak in could be responsible. He won’t directly criticize his fellow residents.

The Ritz is a Section 8 hotel for people with mental or physical disabilities; rent is \$750 monthly. Duffy says he’s retired so he pays 30% of his income; the government makes up the rest.

Crock pot cooking in his room is okay but hot plates are forbidden, though some residents ignore the rule. With his budget, Duffy eats at “all the soup kitchens.”

Duffy has a petulant streak because, he says, he’s never satisfied.

“Having been in the Aarti, I’m challenged to find anything as pleasant as that was. But the Ritz is better than many. The biggest problem is the behavior issue.”

Duffy, who volunteered for several years in District 6 Supervisor Chris Daly’s office, and now volunteers for Daly’s former aide Supervisor John Avalos, says he



PHOTO BY MARJORIE BEGGS

Carmen Sigua, 77, two years a widow, still feels secure in her unit at the Alexander and in the neighborhood.

doesn’t have the answers.

“But I try to get people to vote and take responsibility for their neighborhood and district and to defend the public resources that are the basis of our well-being,” he says. “Then I think they’ll start thinking of their personal issues. It’s the audacity of hope.”

The Ritz lobby and front desk were recently refurbished and a new elevator installed. The hallways are clean and bright, a contrast to many private SROs that are decrepit and dirty.

Duffy says at times the place is very friendly and people look out for each other. His idea of a good time is sitting in the lobby with a half dozen residents talking and letting their hair down. But it’s a fleeting moment.

“People are on their guard all the time. Then it breaks down for a minute and people are open and friendly. And I dunno, maybe they are sorry they let down their security for a moment.”

Duffy’s cluttered room is conveniently messy and his mattress on the floor is near a wall wash basin. The bathroom is small, without a door, shared once with an adjoining room before the renovation sealed it off. It has an old-timey bathtub and toilet and, between them, a small, jammed refrigerator with a microwave on top.

Asked if he would move out of the Ritz and the TL if he had the chance, he immediately says, “Yes!” then backs off. “Maybe I was too quick. The TL is not the best place to get old in. But what can I do about it?

You see a lot of sick people making bad life choices — it’s depressing sometimes. I try not to think about it. “Some people here do age gracefully and they’re role models, exceptions. But I think when I get old I’ll ask for a senior SRO like the Alexander.”

That’s another TNDC building, and right next door. ■
— TOM CARTER

Carmen Sigua

CARMEN Sigua smiles sweetly and says that the Alexander Residence is her home and it’s just fine with her. “We wouldn’t have stayed here this long if it weren’t nice,” she said.

Eighteen years ago, her husband Ambrosio left the Philippines and moved to the Alexander, then, as now, a HUD-insured Section 8 building. A year later, after good-byes to family and friends, she joined him.

“He had only one friend in San Francisco and we had no family here, but I was so happy to be with him again — I just wanted to see everything with my husband,” Mrs. Sigua said.

Any qualms she might have had about living in an SRO in the Tenderloin are not part of her memories. She recalls taking long walks around the neighborhood with her husband, traveling all over the city to see the sights, leaving the city by bus to do a little gambling in casinos — doing everything together.

TNDC bought the Alexander in 2000 and after its 2004 renovation, the Siguas moved up one floor to a larger room, one with a separate sleeping area and private bathroom, unusual for SROs but more appropriate for a couple, she says.

“This is a good place, and the building hasn’t changed much in 17 years,” she said. “The management takes care of it. If there’s something wrong, like in my bathroom, I call them and they come right away to fix it.”

Today, Mrs. Sigua, 77, lives alone, surrounded by her collections of small figurines, vases filled with cheerful artificial flowers and scores of framed photos. The most recent is of her newest great-grandchild. The oldest is two separate photos in one frame, her at 16 and Ambrosio during World War II in his summer Navy whites.

Ambrosio died in 2008 during surgery for an aneurysm. He was 82. The brood of their 55-year marriage includes three daughters, four grandchildren and five great-grandkids, all living in the Philippines except for one daughter and her family who live in Japan. Although there are frequent phone calls, busy lives and long distances make visiting difficult, she says, and increase her feelings of loneliness.

“My husband’s death was very hard for me, and it still is,” she said, “but my faith and lots of friends keep me going.”

Mrs. Sigua looks trim and fit, which she attributes to not sitting around too much. “When someone invites me out, I go.”

One friend has a car, and they take trips to see the Golden Gate Bridge and other city destinations. She still likes to walk, always with a friend, and seems unafraid of heading over to Walgreens at Ninth and Market, or going out to eat at McDonalds or to Kusina Ni Tess, a Filipino restaurant on Ellis Street.

Many afternoons she socializes with Filipina friends in the Alexander’s airy lobby, relaxing after a morning of cleaning and tidying her rooms. Church on Sunday and Bible study one or two evenings a week at the First Christian Ministry fill her hours. Evenings she likes TV — “Family Feud” and “The Price Is Right” are my favorites,” she says.

From her eighth-floor room, she can see “problems and things going on” on the street, but they don’t seem to have colored her affection for her home: “It’s a safe place. I’m alone, but I feel safe. I’m okay. I’m always okay.” ■
— MARJORIE BEGGS

Jim Ayers

At the Lawrence Hotel on Sixth Street there’s one resident who other tenants look to whenever building renovations are needed. “It’s a one-man army: me,” Jim Ayers says about his ongoing struggle for better living conditions.

Ayers served in the Army from 1960 until 1963 and he’s brought that no-nonsense style to the Lawrence, saying what he thinks and standing up for what he believes is right.

Since 1992, when Ayers moved into the same room he lives in now, he has fought the landlord: to remove the decrepit, “stinky” carpets, install sprinklers and



PHOTO BY CONOR GALLAGHER

Feisty Jim Ayers, whose personal mission is to improve the Lawrence Hotel, knows the baggage that comes with cheap rent.

upgrade the wiring so that two electrical appliances can run simultaneously without blowing a fuse. On all of these fronts, Ayers has won using his tried-and-true tactic: “Bitchin’ at ‘em.”

Ayers has spent the past 18 years in the same third-floor room in what he calls a “nice setup.” About 130 square feet, the room has a sink in the corner, microwave, an oven, a PC, a TV and a 1950s GE refrigerator.

“This milk will get so cold,” Ayers says, taking a carton out of the fridge, “it will give you an ice cream headache.”

Ayers’ most prized possession is his stereo with its wired speakers bellowing noise from all directions. He keeps it tuned to 96.5 KOIT except when his neighbors complain it’s too loud. When that happens, he pops in Beethoven or Tchaikovsky and cranks the volume till the bass synthesizes with his neighbor’s wall-pounding complaints.

Ayers feels like pounding the wall himself sometimes because the bathroom situation is so frustrating. There are 40 residents and one shower, which makes for long waits. To make matters worse, the shower is on the second floor; Ayers lives on the third where there are two toilets.

“Going to the bathroom praying no one’s down there, it gets mind-boggling after a while,” he says. It’s worse in the middle of the night. He has to get up, get dressed, grab his keys and toilet paper, lock his door and hope that when he gets there the toilet is available. Sometimes there are feces on the seat and urine on the floor and when it’s cold the unheated facility takes inconvenience to another level. “You freeze to death in there in the winter. It all gets old.”

He doesn’t leave the Lawrence because “it’s the same at every SRO,” and rent here is cheap (\$357 a month for his room). “You have to put up with it,” Ayers says. “If I get down in the dumps, I’ll turn on some cartoons or go outside and walk around the neighborhood.”

Lights are out from 9 p.m. until waking at 3 a.m. when Ayers makes a cup of coffee and goes outside to wait for the street sweeper. When it starts to rumble down the street, he hops in his red Toyota 4Runner and drives it around the block until the street is clean and he can reclaim his spot in front of his SRO.

He’s back in his room by 4:20 a.m., watches “Cops,” and then the 5 a.m. news. After the news he turns the radio on and sleeps until 10 a.m. During the day Ayers is in his room for roughly eight of the 11 hours he’s awake. The time outside of his room is spent on Sixth Street talking to people or just observing. During his days and nights waiting for the street cleaner, Ayers has seen a lot on Sixth Street.

“People have picked up pigeon feces because it’s white and tried to smoke it,” Ayers says. He understands addiction. His brother overdosed on heroin twice. He knows that if anyone wants to stop “they have to get out of the environment around here.”

The environment at times becomes claustrophobic and Ayers has to get out too, even if only for a little while.

“There were times I used to wake up so disgusted with life I’d just get in my

car and drive,” he says. “Sometimes I’d end up in Reno.” He’s thankful that he has a car so he can escape when he needs to. “A lot of people don’t leave their room except for beer, cigarettes, drugs or food.” They’re not much help in his battles with the landlord.

“People in the hotel are a good bunch, but when push comes to shove they clam up because they’re afraid of the landowner.” The former Army man has no such fear and likes to cite something his grandfather told him: “Money can buy you a lot of things, but one thing in this world that money can’t buy is respect.” He emphasizes *respect*. “Don’t lose it. Don’t let it go, because you’ll never get it back.”

While the Lawrence has come a long way from the “hell” and “dump” it was 18 years ago, improvements still need to be made, Ayers says. His two biggest concerns are getting the locks removed from the mailboxes in the hotel foyer so residents can get individual mail delivery and doing something about the noise at Club Six, located beneath the hotel at street level.

“I’ve been fighting them for eight years,” he says about Club Six. “I call the police, I call the Entertainment Commission.” The club owner has spent many thousands of dollars on soundproofing, yet the noise persists.

Ayers came from Fresno to San Francisco in 1991. He was living on Stevenson Street in the camper attached to his truck. He started seeing a woman who lived at the Lawrence and, in 1992, got his own room there. He sometimes wonders what family life would be like.

“It’s a very boring situation to be alone,” he says. “The mind starts wandering, wondering, ‘What are you doing?’” And he thinks often about his two children, both live in Kentucky. He drove out to see them eight years ago. Before he left, his daughter sent him a map with the route mapped out along with places to eat, sleep and get gas. “It was so cute.”

While he may think about family a lot, Ayers doesn’t foresee any change for him in the near future.

“I’ll keep doing the same thing I’m doing,” he says. “I’m an activist.” ■
— CONOR GALLAGHER

Cecil Baker

CECIL Baker, 59, is sitting in the Ambassador Hotel’s small lobby, back to the window, his short blonde wig backlit by the morning sun. He’s wearing earrings, a string of beige beads and a colorful brown, black and tan figured smock that he says is women’s nightwear he bought at Ross. He prefers to wear it as a shirt, today over black tights.

Baker’s dimpled, pudgy face works as he talks and his eyes are sincere behind large glasses. He acknowledges my approval of his matched outfit by saying, “Well, I haven’t decided what I am ... yet.”

Baker has lived in SROs for 26 years, nearly 20 at



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

Cecil Baker lived at the Ambassador when it was ‘the AIDS hotel.’ He misses the community support of those days, but not the rats and trash.

the Ambassador. He has seen enough to write a book. If he did, a lot of it would be pitiful. And some of it, amid the tragedy, would be joyous and uplifting.

Once Baker had a job he loved: payroll secretary at Kaiser Engineers in Oakland, but he was laid off and he moved to San Francisco. He wasn’t comfortable as a gay man living at home, he says, because his father “hated” him. His mother kept quiet and never spoke against homosexuality.

Baker lived in the Aldridge on Jones Street in 1986, as did quite a few prostitutes. He had a part-time job but got mixed up in drugs, lost the job and moved into the Ambassador in 1990 before it was a nonprofit. It was about the time Hank Wilson was managing the SRO, and sick and dispossessed people with AIDS were welcomed there to save them from homelessness and death in the streets.

TNDC bought the Ambassador in 1999, renovated its 134 rooms — installing a bathroom in each — and completed the job in 2003. Baker, who had been living at the Delta on Sixth Street (now the Bayanihan), moved back in.

The Aldridge and Delta were dumps, he said, but didn’t compare with the rock bottom the Ambassador, a magnificent, 12-story hotel built in 1910, had hit in the 1990s. It was in such deplorable condition in 1999 that many AIDS residents and the agencies serving them had fled.

“There was trash in the hallways and rats and everybody was having sex with anybody in the stairwells — there were a few straight people — 24-hour-a-day drug dealing and people jumping out of the windows and prostitutes bringing in johns with guns,” Baker recalls.

“Visiting Nurses had a station on the second floor and I felt good about that and (Rev.) Glenda Hope was doing good work here. There was one expert here to help people get on SSI, too.” The Ambassador hotel was known as San Francisco’s AIDS hotel and a documentary film was made about it.

“I moved into my completed room in 2002 with all its amenities,” Baker says. “It has a bathroom now, for example. It used to be for poor people with AIDS. Now it’s so expensive to live here I couldn’t afford it. I’m on Social Security disability. And the people who live here are not particularly working class. It bites the shit out of me.”

Fifty rooms at the Ambassador are designated for HUD McKinney Shelter Plus Care Section 8 rental assistance. The remaining rooms are available to anyone earning 50% or less than the area media income. In 2007, that was \$65,500. Most qualify.

A social worker reaches around Baker’s walker and leaves a box of cookies and one of brownies, Baker has trouble walking because of diabetes and back pain. In the afternoon he’ll give out the treats at the Listening Post, an upstairs room Rev. Hope created in the terrible Nineties as a place for residents to gather.

“This used to be a welcoming building,” Baker went on. “Well, it was mostly good-looking homosexual men who came here. Hank helped people get in who didn’t have much money.”

Modern times are different.
“It’s a very nice, clean building now, but high income doesn’t mean civility. When somebody died in the old days, the room where the memorial was held was overflowing with people. Now, it’s just three or four who attend. Now, we don’t know each other and we don’t care.”

Baker’s 8- by 10-foot fifth-floor room is tidy and home also to two large cats, Charlie and Johnny, who a couple of years ago made the cover of Paws magazine. A framed picture of the cover hangs on one wall showing Baker proudly holding his “babies.” But for all its coziness, the room’s single-pane windows on two sides keep it cold.

Despite SRO improvements over the years, such as establishing the SRO Hotel Visitor Policy that outlawed the notorious practice of desk clerks charging people who visit in SROs, there are still things that grate on Baker about the SRO life. The policy rules limit residents to eight overnight visits a month. “It’s not right,” Baker says. “Why should we be limited at all? People in homes and hotels aren’t. And it’s impossible to maintain a serious relationship because of it.”

Baker, like many other SRO dwellers, longs for the past, or some mysterious catalyst to make the present an equally heartening experience.

“People just aren’t connected,” he says. “We’ve nothing in common except being different shades of poor. We used to have the AIDS epidemic.” ■
— TOM CARTER



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

Marvis Phillips recently lost the love of his life, and his community work has become more important than ever.

Marvis Phillips

THE Alexander Residence has a spacious lobby. It’s airy and redolent of old times with almost a Southern feel. In the middle of the lobby, close to the quick flow of people, Marvis Phillips is observing everyone from his spot on the couch. Phillips uses the lobby like a sitting room pretty much daily.

After 8 at night it gets quieter in the common area. The residents drift upstairs and 54-year-old Phillips has to face the fact that he is on his own. This is still new for him. His wife, Loretta, died in November. They had both lived at the Alexander since Marvis moved in, in 1992. He met Loretta in the lobby, when he was high on meth.

“But she decided to sit next to me. That was a good time,” he says.

Two years after they met, she got him off the needle, and he’s been clean since. His life changed when Loretta entered it. Now it has changed, because she is gone. He is getting better day by day, but thinks the Alexander Residence should have a support group for persons in the Tenderloin who are newly widowed.

His room, one of 179 at the Alexander, has a bathroom. It costs him \$269 a month. He’s been on SSI for more than 30 years. Phillips, originally from Denver, suffers from a back injury, is manic-depressive, and unable to work.

Phillips lives in the end room on a spur off the long corridor on the 12th floor where the carpet is spotless and the bright walls unblemished. “Oh, yes, very clean,” Phillips says from his bed on which he spends most of his time. Also in the room is a chair, a herd of 100 stuffed animals, other collections, files and jars that would spell clutter if not so well organized. Behind his bed are two windows that give good light. “They shampoo the carpets every other month and clean linoleum (in the downstairs community room) once a week.”

His ailments also entitle him to free frozen dinners seven days a week — through a program for the disabled under 60. Hot plates are not allowed, but residents can have a microwave oven or a hot pot, so Phillips heats the cold meals. He also dines out, often at Manor House Restaurant next door on Jones Street.

“I have to pay there, though,” he says. His smile suggests the food is worth it. What better testimony to culinary satisfaction than a neighborhood son with a record of 25 years eating there. Phillips has privileges, too. “The fried rice says with hamburger, or sausage or ham, but I tell Mimi ‘all of it’ and that’s what I get.” He keeps the Manor menu bedside.

Eating at the ever-busy joint gives him a burst of social activity, but it is not enough. Phillips dreams about more events for his Alexander neighbors.

“We used to take buses to places. Every July 4th we went to the beach and had a barbecue. We used to go to Marine World. We miss that around here,” he says and suggests that the recreational services should be arranged by TNDC.

Alexander Residence has been the best SRO where Phillips has lived in his 30 years in residential hotels. He knows how bad it can get, because he has lived in six SROs, including the Elm, the Ritz, the Cadillac, Baldwin House and the Marlton Manor. His worst experience was at the Elm from 1980 to 1983.

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