

FRIAR KELLY CULLEN
Made TNDC what it is

More than 400 mourners jammed the St. Boniface sanctuary Dec. 3 to pay homage to the late charismatic Franciscan friar, Kelly Cullen, whose work to improve the lives of the Tenderloin poor reminded some of the order's founder, St. Francis of Assisi.

Brother Kelly's leadership, despite no administrative training, turned around TNDC, the then-stagnant affordable housing nonprofit, after he became executive director in 1992, a position he held until 2005 when he resigned and Housing Director Don Falk, whom Brother Kelly hired in 1994, took over.

In Brother Kelly's 13 years at the helm, Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corp. increased the number of its low-cost units from 574 to 1,600. Now TNDC owns or operates 30 SROs and apartment buildings that house up to 3,000 low-income and formerly homeless residents in 2,500 units.

Brother Kelly also created the Celebrity Pool Toss in 1992, an annual fundraiser for TNDC's kids' programs that raised \$200,000 this year. He was influential, too, in starting the tuition-free De Marillac Academy next to St. Boniface for poor neighborhood kids.

He won donations from the socially conscious well-to-do who live outside of the Tenderloin after bringing them into the skid row neighborhood to see dire conditions that their generosity could alleviate. He served on the St. Anthony Foundation board in the 1990s.

"He wasn't Francis, but Francis was him," said Lou Girardo at the lectern.

Brother Kelly died Nov. 13 while on a pilgrimage in Rome. He was 57. Cause of death is pending.

A native of Washington, Brother Kelly came to San Francisco in 1979, having professed his Franciscan vows

the year before. The handsome friar had an effervescent personality that was infectious and an asset to TNDC.

"He combined community activism with the Franciscan style to make life better (in the Tenderloin)," said Clio Tarazi, a Berkeley architect, former TNDC board president and now the St. Anthony board president. "He said people want to be generous and kind, and he convinced me. He brought people into the Tenderloin where they were afraid to go.

"Justice and generosity," she said, were his motivation.

As if to illustrate the impact of Brother Kelly's outreach, wealthy financier Warren Hellman said he and Brother Kelly had become friends over the years "and always stayed in touch." They once studied the Torah together. "He was a tower of community unity," Hellman said. He then announced a \$7,500 donation to be divided equally among TNDC, the Mission San Luis Rey Retreat where Brother Kelly had been living, and retired Franciscan friars.

The mourners said Brother Kelly was a very spiritual person who found God everywhere in life. They sometimes were amused and often inspired by his actions. He picked up pennies on the street because he "couldn't disregard the small gifts" in life; he found spiritual messages in musicals (he saw "Les Miz" four times) and movies ("he didn't just watch movies, he crawled inside them"); and he traveled to Italy, France and Thailand for renewed inspiration.

"But he was a friar, not a monk!" said Father Tom West, referring to the Chronicle obituary that identified him as a monk. "Monks go off to be by themselves. Friars go into the world. And Kelly took that to the hilt."

State Sen. Mark Leno, who had also been a friend, said Brother Kelly



PHOTO COURTESY TNDC

Celebrities dress in costume for TNDC's pool toss fundraiser and Brother Kelly, donning wings in 1995, liked the idea that everyone has it in them to be an angel.

was surprised to hear that Leno once wanted to be a rabbi. Then he became very protective when Mayor Willie Brown appointed Leno a supervisor in 1998. "You don't know what the other side is like," Leno said Brother Kelly warned, citing the corrupting pitfalls of sex, power and money — the opposites, he said, of the Franciscan vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Brother's Kelly's standards and "deep sense of community inspire me today," Leno said.

Ellen Cullen Harris, Brother Kelly's niece, said she always adored her uncle and told an anecdote that showed his love of freedom and flair for living. Once when babysitting her as a 3-year-old, he woke her from a nap, telling her to remove her shoes and they'd go outside and play on the lawn. She said she still remembers the squishy mud and freshly mowed grass and what a joy it was, but then timidly asked, "Won't we get into trouble?"

"Who cares!" he thundered, she

recalled. "Aren't we having fun?"

She paused and sobbed, "He was a bright light when he walked into a room."

His friends also alluded to his "dark side." His methamphetamine use to fuel his fast-paced life, reported elsewhere, led to an addiction that caused him to resign from TNDC and seek treatment. He later became director of the Mission San Luis Rey Retreat Center in Oceanside, visiting here annually for the pool toss, and sometimes got tossed in, and for TNDC's birthday celebration.

"He was vivacious and never afraid to jump off a cliff for those in need," said Girardo. "And it was my privilege to bail him out of jail" and help with his "recovery."

Since Brother Kelly loved celebrations and demonstrations of support, Girardo said, he asked everyone at the St. Boniface memorial to stand and applaud. They did, with big smiles, for nearly a minute. ■

— TOM CARTER

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