

DARWIN DIAS
Fought for his peers

Darwin Dean Dias, a Latino who became an activist in many causes but was noted for fighting for the rights of the mentally ill, died July 24 of lung cancer at age 77.

He died at Coming Home Hospice a week after relocating there from the Alexander Residence, where he had lived for two decades.

Sister Andrea Turbak of St. Anthony's Foundation welcomed four dozen people to the Alexander on Eddy Street Aug. 12 for a memorial service.

Among those in attendance were Robby Cruz-DeCastro, Mr. Dias' partner of 36 years, and many friends and colleagues from their battles on behalf of the mentally disabled and other righteous causes.

The service opened with "Amazing Grace," sung by a 12-member group from St. Boniface that also played clarinet and guitar. Speaker after speaker reminisced about Mr. Dias' efforts on their behalf.

"He was just one of those wonderful spirits," Fancher Bennett Larson recalled. "Darwin had a true vision of what self-help was about. He was imbued with something that was righteous and right and beautiful. He was able to project this, giving hope and dignity. He was a light to this community, striving for what is good."

Betty Duran, a social worker at the Alexander, and Yolanda Recania of the Salvation Army, said that, in his power wheelchair, Mr. Dias earned the nickname "Speedy." "He was always going so fast, with his hair flying," Duran said. "I used to tell him, 'Be careful, you might get a ticket for speeding!' His dream was being in a city with no homeless people."

Mr. Dias had lived in San Francisco, the city of his birth, since the mid-1950s, after growing up in Fresno. He was out as a gay man and living in the Castro "long before it became the gay Mecca," Cruz-DeCastro quoted him as saying. Mr. Dias worked for Bank of America and then at Cliff's Variety Store on Castro Street, and during the Summer of Love lived in the Haight-Ashbury and worked light shows at rock concerts and for the Angels of Light.

He continued to wear his hair long and prided himself on being an original long-haired hippie, Cruz-DeCastro wrote in a biography he submitted to District 6 Supervisor Jane Kim, who asked for something to read at the board's Aug. 2 meeting, which was adjourned in Mr. Dias' memory.

Mr. Dias advocated against the Vietnam War and for the civil rights of people of color, gays and the mentally ill. Cruz-DeCastro said that in a '70s



PHOTO BY JUSTIN DECASTRO

demonstration outside the Examiner newspaper offices police kicked out Mr. Dias' front teeth, but never charged him with any crimes. The protest was against police entrapment of gay men at Macy's and the newspaper's publication of their names and addresses.

Cruz-DeCastro wrote that he and Mr. Dias were in the crowd outside the International Hotel in the early hours of Aug. 4, 1977, when police and ax-wielding Sheriff Richard Hongisto evicted its elderly, mostly Filipino and Chinese tenants, after almost a decade of controversy.

Otto Duffy, another speaker, recalled how Mr. Dias, who in the early '80s had taken to living on the sidewalk behind the Aarti Hotel on Leavenworth Street, was eventually invited in by the friars and then participated in its transformation into the first Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corp. building in 1981. Mr. Dias went on to serve on TNDC's Board of Directors in the 1980s and '90s.

Larson, first to speak, also prepared a printed testimonial that was distributed to the gathering along with a program and two hymns, "Rock of Ages" and "The Old Rugged Cross," which were stacked by the photo, three floral arrangements and candles at the front of the Alexander's community room. In it, she described Mr. Dias' work with the San Francisco Network of Mental Health Clients and its Spiritmenders Community Center, a no-meds, no-shrinks, self-help drop-in center for people who felt abused by the mental health system. Spiritmenders, with Mr. Dias on its staff and board, served the disaffected mentally ill from the early '80s until it sputtered out in 2008.

"The primary goals that Darwin championed were the development of self-reliance and a community that, by example, would counteract stigma, prejudice and discrimination," Larson wrote.

Michael Nulty, longtime TL organizer and a resident of the Alexander, recalled knowing Mr. Dias for 15 or 16 years. "He had a lifetime of contributing," Nulty said. "He was very much into disability rights as an advocate." Nulty cited Mr. Dias' work for the Alexander Tenants Association as treasurer, utilizing his skills from his days of working at a bank and as a charter member of the Central City Democrats and the North of Market Planning Coalition.

Nulty called him a "poster child for hoarding and cluttering — he got into the paper, started advocating, and finally services (for hoarding) were created."

Susan Owsley stood up to say that she had known Mr. Dias "longer than anyone except my kids" — for 41 years. "We were horror addicts." She said; she used to rent movies two at a

time for them to watch. She said, though, that "King of Hearts" most made her think of Mr. Dias.

"He taught us how to be a community/mental health activist," Alexander neighbor Marvis Phillips said, citing work on strengthening ordinances for rent control and on hotel conversion. "We always knew we could talk to each other any time we wanted to."

Last to reminisce was Cruz-DeCastro, Mr. Dias' longtime partner.

"We went through many hard times in our lives," he said, and spoke of their resentments toward the Catholic Church, in which they were both raised, over its positions on gay rights and women's reproductive rights.

Cruz-DeCastro recalled the day Mr. Dias entered the hospice.

"He didn't want to go, I didn't want him to go. It was hard for me to see him leave the Alexander," Cruz-DeCastro said. But "on that day he was in so much pain. The pain was enormous, I wanted to tell him, 'Let go, let go, it's time to move on, there's only so much we can do!'"

"Of all the people I've met, he was the one I was closest to. It was like watching my own life pass before me watching him die. I made him promise me to come back and give me a signal. Whether he ever will, I don't know."

After the attendees sang the final verse of "Amazing Grace," Sister Turbak ended the service "to celebrate a great man among us" with a few comments on how Mr. Dias had been "a huge blessing to us. We fight for justice, inclusion, dignity and respect. In the end, what do we have? Our relationships." ■

— MARK HEDIN

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