

**LEROY LOOPER**  
**Pioneer of supportive housing**

From City Hall to San Quentin, representatives of the community cross-section that he'd served gathered at the Cadillac Hotel in early October to honor Leroy Branch Looper, whose vision had transformed the site from a slated-for-demolition relic into a beacon of hope.

Mr. Looper, a former addict and convict who dedicated himself to helping others, died Sept. 11, three days after passing out in his chair at McCormick and Kuleto's restaurant, just after he'd made a speech. He was 86.

Former Mayors Dianne Feinstein and Art Agnos sent huge floral displays. Mayor Lee, Tenderloin police Capt. Joe Garrity, Supervisors Bevan Dufty and Malia Cohen, Assemblyman Tom Ammiano, state Democratic Party Chair John Burton, a bunch of musicians who'd performed at the "Concerts at the Cadillac" series, men Mr. Looper had helped transition from prison, friends and family filled the hotel lobby to overflowing as they reminisced about Mr. Looper's remarkable life story.

Mr. Looper rose from a child of the underworld to become a leader in efforts to lift others from such circumstances, using his hard-earned street smarts to educate better-credentialed social workers in how that world actually works.

"Leroy had a charmed life," said Kathy Looper, his wife of 39 years. He was "a man who changed destiny in a lot of ways, not only his own but others' as well."

Mr. Looper's 1976 purchase and subsequent conversion of Eddy Street's run-down Cadillac Hotel into a supportive housing facility may prove to be his most significant and lasting accomplishment, though there were many more.

In New York in the early 1960s, he founded Reality House, a drug detox and rehabilitation facility free to addicts. Kathy Looper said that until Reality House, drug programs were available only to whites. Mr. Looper left New York and opened Reality House West in San Francisco's Fillmore District in 1968.

"There was no other program like Reality House, there were no community-run drug treatment centers," said Kathy Looper, who was an S.F. State student seeking school credits while the campus was closed during the student strike when she met her future husband at Reality House West.

Mr. Looper recalled some of his struggles to get Reality House rolling in a fascinating autobiography he wrote in the late '70s that described, for instance, a shootout with a neighboring group of Black Panthers.

"Leroy was an incredibly persistent man, and if something didn't work he tried something else," Kathy Looper said, and described a "handshake deal" struck in 1976 with Cadillac owner John Foggy after Mr. Looper had told Foggy he wanted Reality House to become self-sufficient. Foggy operated the Cadillac Hotel at the time, but the hotel was deteriorating. Only about 40 of its more than 150 rooms were being rented. If a room needed any repair, even just to

fix a broken window, it was simply boarded up.

Kathy Looper and Brad Paul, then staff of the North of Market Planning Coalition, believe that speculators — including Don Fisher of the Gap, who also had had a stake in the Cadillac — had bought the hotel in anticipation of rising real estate values. Zoning ordinances of the time — later revised after Mr. Looper and Paul, among others, made it an issue — allowed for much bigger buildings and in theory, the hotel could eventually be demolished and replaced with much bigger — thus pricier — properties, as had occurred in what is now the Yerba Buena area South of the Slot. But the Cadillac was going to seed, and the

parole, they could be placed in a program at the Cadillac to prepare them for re-entry into society, a key component that Mr. Looper had found missing in his earliest attempts at rehabbing drug users in New York. For the first month they were at the Cadillac, Paul said, they couldn't leave their third-floor quarters. In the second month, they could leave with a chaparrone, and so on. Once they had completed job training, found employment and reconnected with their families, Kathy Looper said, they could be paroled.

The program ran successfully, Paul said, until its funding was cut early in the Reagan years. "People who graduated from the ex-offender program stayed on," Paul said. Meanwhile, seniors, too, were living in the building as it was gradually renovated, including the restoration of its original façade, with labor from the ex-offender, VISTA and CETA jobs programs, according to Kathy Looper, Paul and EXIT Theatre's Richard Livingston, then Reality House administrator.

"If you live in an apartment in the Tenderloin, you're pretty much alone," said Paul, who lived in the Cadillac for 3½ years. "Of all the places I've lived in my life — and there were many — it was where I felt most welcome and safest. You felt like there was always somebody that had your back."

EXIT Theatre staged its first production, "Lives and Loves of the Gibbs Sisters," in the lobby of the hotel in late 1983, Livingston said, an example of how Mr. Looper encouraged community development.

"He increased community services by giving them cheap rent in the Cadillac," Paul said. "He was all about using the building to build back the lives of the people who lived there and rebuilding the neighborhood."

Mr. Looper put a Sizzler restaurant in a Cadillac storefront and the Police Athletic League took over what had been Newman's Gym there, Paul said, "like something out of a 1930 Jimmy Cagney movie." When a new manager sought to commercialize the space and limit its accessibility, Mr. Looper showed him the door. Nowadays, the space, which had previously also been a restaurant and ballroom, is occupied by the Head Start day care center.

Kathy Looper blamed the Sizzler's ultimate failure on changes in the neighborhood after the 1989 earthquake, but in its day it provided dozens of jobs and "a great meal for a great price," she said.

Rev. Glenda Hope had a computer training center there and the Vietnamese Youth Development Center got its start at the Cadillac, too. A donated 1884 Steinway grand piano sits in the lobby today and attracts musicians for regular no-cost concerts.

"Leroy was one of the first to organize activities," Paul said. "This is the model for supportive housing. A lot of it is old residential hotels fixed up ... the Senator, the Iroquois, how they're laid out and staffed."

"He was an amazing guy," Paul said. "One of the most unforgettable people I ever met. He had so much knowledge and passion and cared so much about the people who

lived there."

Paul said that Mr. Looper taught him many surprisingly simple secrets to succeeding where so many have failed. One key, Paul said, was the simple act of pushing a broom.

"People think criminals are crazy," he said Mr. Looper explained to him. "They're not. They're businesspeople. When people are new to town they look around for where the city is telling them it's OK to operate. Vacant storefronts, graffiti and trash" do just that, he said.

"When he first took over the Cadillac, he got a big push broom. The dealers moved down the street." They'd return in a few hours, so Mr. Looper then began hosing down the sidewalk. That would keep them away for a few more hours. Before long, Paul said, merchants up and down the block were following suit and things started improving.

"He understood that was more important than having one more police cruiser."

As if the Cadillac Hotel wasn't enough, the Loopers also in the late '70s took on the Chateau Laura, a mental health facility housed in an aging mansion on the corner of Guerrero and Liberty streets in the Mission. In a 1987 profile in the New Yorker magazine, writer Bill Barich chronicled how the Loopers — Mr. Looper and Kathy had a son and daughter, and he had two sons from a previous marriage — lived in the Chateau, which they renamed Agape after their daughter, while caring for their schizophrenic clients.

Kathy Looper says that, as they aged, the Loopers were less able to personally perform the many chores associated with running Chateau Agape. So they turned its operation over to the city, which promptly tripled the staffing levels, she said. When a client broke the no-smoking rules and a fire broke out, it ultimately spelled the end of Chateau Agape.

Mr. Looper's autobiography, which can be found online, tells of his formative years during the Great Depression, when he lived in Washington, D.C., and learned firsthand the ways of bootleggers, numbers runners, pimps, prostitutes and the people who cared for them, too — most specifically, his beloved Aunt Carrie.

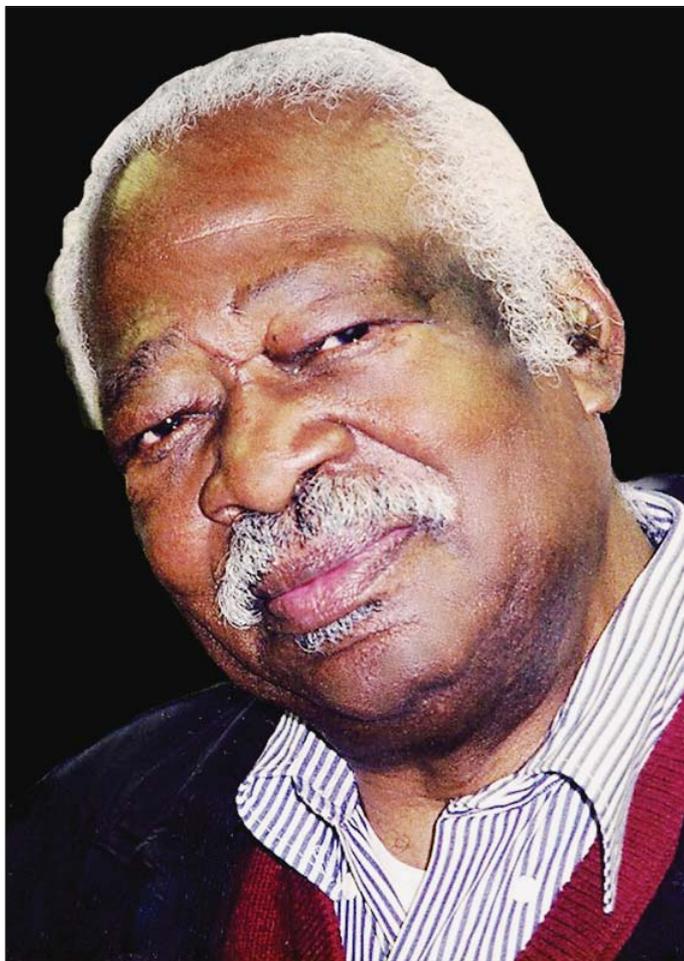
"More than anything, I wanted to be a credit to my race," Mr. Looper wrote.

Mr. Looper was in reform school for petty theft when he was 8, went to jail and prison for drug possession and sales in his 20s, and eventually weaned himself from heroin in his 30s, while living in New York City. In doing so, he discovered that for many leaving heroin, himself included, alcohol proves to be a new challenge. He returned to New York's Riker's Island prison in a new capacity, as a counselor to inmates.

Mr. Looper's activities and accomplishments were perhaps too many to be entirely recounted, but among others, he co-founded the Concerned Business Persons, the Tenderloin AIDS Network, YouthBuild S.F. and YouthBuild U.S.A., the Tenderloin Crime Abatement Committee, San Francisco Alive's Tenderloin Cleanup Committee and the Tenderloin Community Fund. Paul also cited Mr. Looper's role in the Corporation for Supportive Housing, the Tenants Association in the Cadillac, work with Glide and St. Anthony's and NOMPC.

Besides his wife, Kathy, and children Camlo, Esan, Malik and Agape, Mr. Looper leaves eight grandchildren. ■

— MARK HEDIN



Leroy Branch Looper

PHOTO: COURTESY LOOPER FAMILY

anticipated real estate boom had not arrived on Eddy Street.

As Paul tells it, Foggy asked Mr. Looper how much money he had to buy the building, and was told, "None! You're bleeding money. I'm not going to pay you for it, I'm just going to take over your mortgage."

Kathy Looper recalls that the mortgage, in fact, was \$325,000, but that the price came to \$525,000 as Foggy paid all the bills for the first two years after the Loopers took control. "He really went out of his way to be of help to us," she said, "He's a hero in this story."

"The timing was perfect," says the Tenderloin Housing Clinic's Randy Shaw, who calls Mr. Looper his mentor. "1977 was also the year of the International Hotel, the demolitions of SROs South of Market ... the Cadillac became an important model" for the concept of supportive housing.

"Supportive housing didn't become a term until the mid- to late-'80s," Paul said. "Residential hotels were associated with flop houses or slums."

For a few years, Mr. Looper had a contract with the Bureau of Prisons for "keeping the foxes with the hens," Kathy Looper says. "Who would think of putting prisoners in with senior citizens?" But, at the Cadillac, she said, "It worked. They took care of each other, 'cause they're both wounded."

"Technically, it was a federal prison," Paul explained. The deal was, as convicts got to within 90 days of