

RAJHA MOLER
Grew up living in a mental hospital

In all likelihood, Rajha Moler was happier in the last few months of his 66-year life than he'd ever been before, somehow forgiving his mother who put him as a 12-year-old in a mental hospital, his home for his next five formative years.

None of the half-dozen mourners at Mr. Moler's June 15 memorial at the William Penn Hotel knew that melancholy fact. He had lived at the SRO only three months. What his neighbors knew was that the short, plump man who was turning bald was friendly, kind, gentle. One mourner said he thought Mr. Moler had been homeless a long time.

His third floor, across-the-hall neighbor said he hoped he was resting in peace.

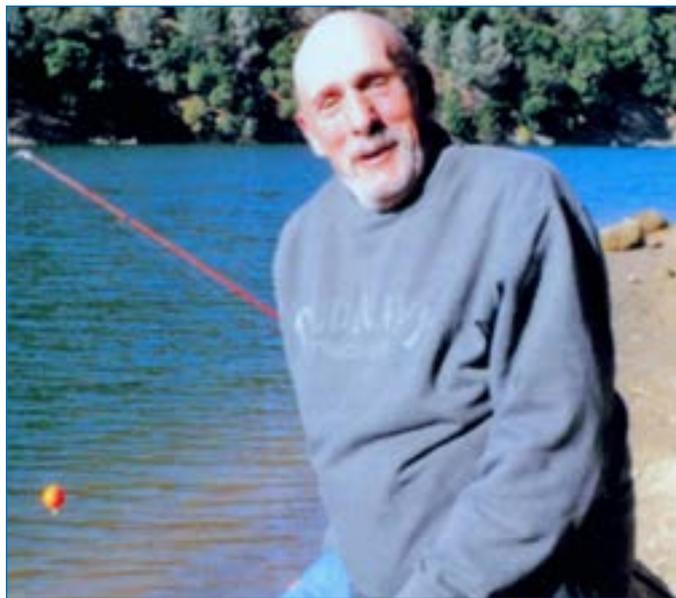
Mr. Moler died June 3 in Sacramento. No one knew why he was there, or the cause of his death.

"But he was very happy to be here," said Megan Smith, William Penn tenant counselor.

Mr. Moler had come from Seattle at some point, she said, but had no family. He volunteered often and regularly at a recovery program on Sixth Street. "He wanted to give back to the community — he said it was fulfilling for him," Smith said. "And he had a lot of friends there."

Smith had the Sixth Street address on file, plus phone numbers of two friends.

Weeks later, one of the friends, Jonathan Zingkhai, sat at his desk in SoMa perusing his file on Mr. Moler for The Extra. Zingkhai is recovery program manager for City Team, a West Coast ministry serving the poor and disaster survivors. Its San Francisco location houses 26 men at 164 Mission St. and has an alcohol and drug recovery



Rajha Moler fishing from the bank of Lake Del Valle where he "surrendered" to God in 2009.

program. Mr. Moler lived there in 2009 and again in 2011. His drug of choice was cocaine — powder first, then free-base and crack — for 40 years.

In his biographical information for City Team, Mr. Moler had written that he was born in a home in the Midwest "where they didn't want me," Zingkhai read. His mother put him in a mental hospital at age 12. When he was 15, his estranged father — before going into the hospital for surgery — said he'd come get him out after the operation. The two would live together. But the father died and the teenager was left waiting, abandoned again. Mr. Moler came to California when he got out.

"I was in India when he died," Zingkhai said, looking up. "I was close to him. We had stayed in touch. But he disappeared for a month. I didn't hear from him. Then a social worker called and told me."

Zingkhai resumed with the file. Mr. Moler was troubled by his mother's unconscionable

action, forever agonizing and asking why she had left him in an institution. "He was very confused by that," Zingkhai said. "He said once his mother said he looked too much like his father and she didn't want to see him."

But at the end of his life, Mr. Moler managed to find "compassion" for his mother, Zingkhai said, because he had changed.

Mr. Moler had been homeless 30 years, and in and out of jail for 20 years. He lived under the freeway at Seventh and Harrison streets much of the time, another friend said.

He came to City Team in 2009 and stayed five months without completing the rehab program. He was quiet and seemed self-absorbed. Once, Zingkhai took a small group of men on a five-day camping trip to Lake Del Valle south of Livermore. He took Mr. Moler aside to fish with. Alone on the sunny bank, Mr. Moler began telling his life story, often crying uncontrollably. Zingkhai said

he finally said, "I have only one hope, that's God, no family only God. How do I learn lessons from God?" Zingkhai told him he had to "surrender" his life to God. "And that day he did it."

Mr. Moler left City Team for a year, but returned in late 2010. He again entered a year-long rehab similar to the 12-step AA program. He graduated in November 2011 in a class of five, including his friend Steven Mulloy.

"Rajha laughed a lot," Mulloy said. "People wanted to talk to him, be around him. That's why I chose to be with him. He was my mentor."

Before Mr. Moler went off on his own, he told Zingkhai he had forgiven his mother. "He thought he'd meet her in heaven," Zingkhai said.

He often came by to volunteer answering the phone.

Zingkhai and Mulloy figured he had gone to Sacramento to see an old cocaine buddy.

The Sacramento coroner's office could only confirm the date of Mr. Moler's death, that he died in "his residence," and that his cause of death could take six months to determine. ■

— TOM CARTER

PAUL K. MATLOCK
Pain defined him

Ten people sat in a tight circle in the Civic Center Residence community room, remembering Paul Matlock, who died July 1. Almost everyone who spoke at the July 11 memorial recalled the suffering that defined Mr. Matlock's last days.

Resident Tanya Wells said she'd known him since he moved to the Civic Center Residence five years ago. "Paul was a very strong and sensitive man, and he always knew how to make me laugh, even if he wasn't well and was in a lot of pain."

Wells talked about the need to express our feelings to others. "I'm so glad I was able to let Paul know I loved him a lot," she said. "That's so important — that we know someone cares."

Mr. Matlock was 51 when he died in the hospital. Born in Texarkana, Texas, he was the fourth of eight children and moved to San Francisco with his family when he was 11. He attended public schools in the city and later worked as a detailer at Volvo and Chrysler Dodge dealerships and for the Red and White Fleet ferries.

Neighbor Steven Royston said he used to cook for Mr. Matlock: "I knew him from a friend who also went to dialysis. Paul was a cool dude. They used to call him 'Chicken George' in the neighborhood, I think because he had such a good soul. I'm gonna miss him."

Starre Cannon, a social worker at the SRO since September, got to know Mr. Matlock pretty well, she said, and found the news of his death shocking, though she knew he was very sick. "He was such a polite, kind man," she said. "I'm so glad he's not in pain anymore."

Mr. Matlock had a "nice, quiet spirit about him and I liked him a lot," added Anthony Caldwell, who became emotional talking about his neighbor. "He suffered — we all do — but I did what I could to be there for him. I didn't find out right away that he had died."

"I never got to say goodbye to him."

Trying to control his tears, Caldwell said he was grateful for the opportunity to speak about what the loss meant to him. It's a sentiment heard often at memorials in Tenderloin SROs, where relationships may appear casual but provide tangible friendships. ■

— MARJORIE BEGGS

★ ★ ★ Tenderloin Star: SRO Soup Mama, a very special chef

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People chip in dollars to cover the cost of expensive meat dishes. Her sister in San Jose regularly sends money. And now her nephew has caught on. He is organizing community meals in an Oakland public housing project.

Things threaten to get out of hand whenever Sumi gets a case of apples, though. Soon, it's applesauce time. She makes a batch with cinnamon and brown sugar, and once again, watching out for her flock, makes another without sugar for diabetics.

"People go nuts for it," she says. "They want to take it outside and sell it."

People help her in any small way they can, "like washing dishes," she says. But she does the heavy lifting. "When you're a cook you are particular about your pots and pans — and everyone knows how meticulous I am about cleanliness."

Her artistic kitchen temperament can flare, too. "I'm too bossy and I can get real grouchy."

For neophyte cooks facing common disasters, she has a few quick tips: Burned rice loses the burn taste when you throw a slice of bread on top; burned beans, though, need a submerged sterling silver spoon to do the job. For too much salt, throw in a potato.

Before a meal, she spends quality prep time in the basement kitchen working alone at night to avoid the more popular daytime usage. She's permitted to cook after the kitchen's normal 10 p.m. closing time, and sometimes goes until 3 a.m. On a Friday night she was working on the Sunday meal, pushed up on the calendar because of a conflict. She had washed down the kitchen with Clorox, as always, and would work until midnight managing a case of acorn squash and other vegetables to add to the lentils, and raiding her spices in a grocery bag next to her shiny mound of pots and pans.

Four residents were there early on, two watching TV, one woman baking cornbread, and Roberto, bleary-eyed, hanging out but eager to talk about Sumi.

"She's the soup lady!" he blurts. "Oh, every time I miss it, I feel terrible. And you can go to her home, and she'll give you food from the bottom of her heart. She's beautiful. A soup mama. Like a big sister."

But the next day, the Dalt's only elevator to the basement broke down.

Sumi canceled Sunday's meal because she'd have to move all the food and equipment down from the fifth floor, then walk it down a flight of stairs. The menu shifted to Tuesday. By then, the elevator was fixed.

Tuesday's 2 p.m. timing is not ideal. It's close to noon and many residents have already visited soup kitchens. Even so, Sumi announces seconds are available and taking food to friends is okay with her, a policy that isn't in effect when the social workers make the meals.

"Oh, I appreciate it," said Darryl, 31, among the first through the line, his fourth free Sumi meal. He's clutching three containers and headed for the door. "It's like nothing I've ever had before." But he said he lacked the words to find a comparison, except food at Martin de Porres, a soup kitchen on Potrero Avenue.

Lynne and Marcus, seven-month residents, are eating at a table sampling the fare for just the second time. Lynne, with Aimes Supportive Living Services, teaches nutrition to disabled persons. She praises the food as healthy and nutritious and soon has seconds on salad.

"I think I'm a natural-born caregiver — I do it for me, though."

Sumi Monoarfa