

## OBITUARIES

### RANDI GIVENS

#### Advocate for legal pot

Randi Givens lived at the Ritz Hotel for two decades and had many visitors over the years, but, according to social worker Heather Venisse, he “didn’t socialize much” with fellow residents. That’s why his memorial was so lightly attended by neighbors — only Thanapa Simphanth and Otto Duffy showed up for his Feb. 21 sendoff.

“I really liked him,” said Simphanth, who had lived near Mr. Givens on the first floor. “He was nice to me and he had a nice heart. I remember that he used to go food shopping and bring things back to his room — then he got so skinny and sick. I miss him a lot.”

Despite the small turnout, Mr. Givens’ life emerged as extraordinarily full, productive and active, filled with loving family, political colleagues, and intellectual and artistic accomplishments. He died Feb. 6 in his room at the Ritz. He was 71 years old.

“I’ve lived here at the Ritz 17 years, almost as long as Randi,” said Duffy. “He was quiet, kept to himself and never smiled much. But here’s what I liked about him: He was a left-winger and a real activist.”

Mr. Givens was passionate about legalizing marijuana for adults, wrote blogs and letters to editors, spoke publicly about his beliefs and was eulogized in *West Coast Leaf*, a quarterly newsletter that calls itself “The Cannabis Newspaper of Record.”

“Randi’s and my political paths never crossed,” said Duffy, whose activism is strictly local while Mr. Givens’ was national. “I’m a moderate progressive and he was farther left, and we even had a huge argument about that decades ago, but we made up and I admired him.”

Duffy noted a “pattern” he sees developing in SROs and its aging population.

“People here are getting on in life and you think they’ll never die, that they’ll go on and on,” Duffy said. “Randi hadn’t looked healthy for a long time, though he went on and on.”

Duffy looked around the small third-floor kitchen where the memorial was held, waving an arm at the clean but clearly unused room with no food, no pots and pans, no eating utensils in sight. On a Formica table were only temporary signs of life — and death — a bouquet of spring flowers, a few candles and Mr. Givens’ picture.

“This place isn’t great,” Duffy said, “but the Ritz gave Randi a home and a place to live and work from.”

Immediately after Duffy excused himself to get over to City Hall for a hearing, two women joined the mourners.

Janice Antrillo introduced herself as Mr. Givens’ partner “off and on for 40 years,” and their adult daughter, Cara Givens. Both saw Mr. Givens regularly, their relationships with him affectionate to the end, though not always easy.

“He was such a good guy and a magnetic personality, a great dad and friend,” Antrillo said. “If he got into tiffs a lot of the time, it was because he had a moral compass.”

“He was a strong advocate of Prop. 215 [medical marijuana initiative], and marijuana helped him with his pain.” She grinned, remembering fun times together in the past, long car rides and “so much to do and not enough time.”

He had a pacemaker and had had a hernia operation, Cara Givens said of her father’s many “near-death experiences” and increasing frailty, especially in the last two years, when she was his caretaker: “He’d been in bad health since I was a teenager, and we didn’t know how long he would live. But as far as we know, he passed peacefully in his sleep.”

Antrillo had visited Mr. Givens in



COURTESY CARA GIVENS

### Randi Givens

his room the day before he died. Leaving the hotel, she told Venisse that he had said he wanted to die “at home” — at the Ritz — not in the hospital. When Antrillo came to see him the next day, he was lying in bed and was gone.

Antrillo read a poem a co-worker had given her, “Miss Me — But Let Me Go,” and passed around a photo of Mr. Givens playing billiards with Willie Mosconi, the famed billiards professional from the 1940s through the 1960s.

That was the other great love of Mr. Givens’ life. A crackerjack bar pool player, he won trophies and awards, and in



COURTESY OF GIVENS FAMILY

**Givens’ 1979 marquetry image of rock-n-roll great Jimi Hendrix is made of walnut and avocado wood veneers.**

2004 published a seminal study of the form, *The Eight Ball Bible: A Guide to Bar Table Play*. The 283-page volume is filled with such details as, “Instead of stopping on a draw shot (full ball hit) and then drawing back, an overweight cue ball slides thru a bit before coming back because the object ball cannot absorb all of the cue ball’s momentum (Diagram A).” The book has 460 illustrations and is still in print.

“He also shot videos about billiards and wrote for *Pool & Billiards Magazine*,” Cara Givens told The Extra in an email, “and he learned how to edit his videos — he was very interested in computers and the tech world.”

Mr. Givens, born in Missouri, was an airline mechanic in the U.S. Air Force, came to San Francisco in the ‘60s, attended the College of San Mateo, drove a cab, hung out in divy bars with pool tables in the central city.

He and Antrillo met at the Boarding House, the ‘70s nightclub hot spot on Bush Street off Taylor that featured a parade of comers — Patti Smith, Tom Waits, Neil Young, The Tubes, Bette Midler and many more.

“Then we were licensed street artists in San Francisco,” Antrillo told The Extra later. “I sold my beadwork and he sold his marquetry” — the ancient art of producing images by inlaying various wood veneers.

Cara Givens filled in other details of her family’s life. Her parents, she said, lived apart but were life partners and friends as defined by Jehovah’s Witnesses. “My dad was a believer in their message of faith, although he wasn’t a member of the organized religion. He and I went to the movies regularly. Some

of his favorite music was ZZ Top and the Grateful Dead. He was a dedicated newspaper reader, and his favorite TV show was *The Simpsons*.

“His mother, who is still alive and lives out of state, was ‘his best phone friend.’ They talked on the phone while watching *Wheel of Fortune* together.”

Mr. Givens also is survived by two brothers and two sisters. Cara Givens has made an extensive family tree, charting back 28 sets of grandparents and fact-checking a possible relationship to Catherine Parr, the last of the six wives of King Henry VIII of England. Antrillo says that one of Mr. Givens’ grandmothers was a full-blooded American Indian, probably Cherokee.

“My father has just been accepted for interment, as a veteran, in the National Cemetery in Sacramento,” Cara Givens wrote in an email, “and some of his ashes will be scattered at sea, per his request.”

At the memorial, she told how grateful she was for the time she had to spend with her father during his last years: “His death was a long, drawn-out process, but now I feel a huge sense of relief — I feel positive about my grieving.” ■

— MARJORIE BEGGS

### ARNOLD W. STRINGFELLOW ‘Royalty’ at the Camelot

When Arnold Wayne Stringfellow walked through the lobby sporting his handsome suede jacket of brown and tan squares, lavishing a toothless grin, probably on his way to hang out at Aunt Charlie’s Lounge across the street, he lit up the space around him like a roman candle. You couldn’t help but smile.

That’s what his fellow residents among the 15 mourners — including his regular doctor from S.F. General — said about the slight little man with the big bright aura. He had enhanced the quality of life with his sunny personality and ability to fix mechanical things for them during the 10 years he lived at the Camelot Hotel.

So the hotel’s community room swelled with love for Mr. Stringfellow at his Jan. 24 memorial. He was so easy to be around, truly “connected” with everyone and gave so much of himself, they said.

“I can’t speak because I’ll start crying,” said one disheveled man who headed for a seat in back, turning away from the table on which there was a bouquet and Mr. Stringfellow’s picture. Another table had vegan donuts, cupcakes and bagels for later and a stack of informational sheets on “Recovering from trauma and loss.”

Even the SRO staff choked up.

“A beautiful man, full of love,” said Tony Baldwin, general manager, fighting back tears, “a smile on his face I’ll always remember, a positive cat, and the way he interacted in touching everyone.” Baldwin called him Camelot “royalty.”

Mr. Stringfellow’s case worker, Linda Duncan, said she was in the hall by his fifth-floor room on Jan. 8. Usually, disco music emanated from it, but that day all was quiet except for his labored breathing that she could hear.

“He was struggling to breathe,” she said. “I asked to come in, then sent him to (St. Francis) hospital. He never said a word after that — I visited him — and he died a week later.”

She believed he died of natural causes. The medical examiner said the cause of death wouldn’t be known for three months after his Jan. 21 autopsy. Mr. Stringfellow was 64.

Ironically, Mr. Stringfellow was nicknamed “the Unabomber,” one man said, because he was “always working on something electronic” in his immaculately clean and ordered room. At Aunt Charlie’s, though, they called him “Peaches,” Duncan said.

Another mourner was “jealous,” he said, of Mr. Stringfellow’s ability to understand other people so well, “the only



COURTESY CAMELOT HOTEL

### Arnold Stringfellow

one” to comprehend the mourner’s “genius.” He was crushed by the loss.

The desk clerk said one night she told Mr. Stringfellow she couldn’t go to the bathroom and leave the desk unattended because the front door lock was broken, a security problem. He told her to go anyway, he’d stand by. When she returned he was putting the finishing touches on the lock he had just fixed.

Another time he wanted to make deviled eggs for the hotel’s Halloween party because he said everyone would be crazy about them. He was going to buy the eggs himself, but management wouldn’t hear of it and sprung for them. Sure enough, they were gobbled up in no time.

“I never saw him mad,” said one tenant. “A wonderful man, a beautiful man. He changed my life.”

“He gave the best hugs,” another said.

Little was said about Mr. Stringfellow’s background. He was one of the Camelot’s first residents after it was renovated in 2002 and later became a Direct Access to Housing hotel of the Department of Public Health.

It was believed he had once worked in electronics. He told someone he had met his partner — whoever it was — in the exact spot the Camelot occupied when it was a bar years ago. And he loved to talk about the 1960s, people said.

Jeff Schoenfeld, director of Camelot support services, said he had been in touch with Mr. Stringfellow’s sister in Alabama. She was surprised by the call. She thought her brother had died 10 years ago, he said. Schoenfeld had collected tenants’ comments to send her. They said he was kind and loving and “lit up the room” and made all things electronic better.

“He was not just beautiful but fascinating the way he moved and enjoyed life,” Schoenfeld said.

Mr. Stringfellow often rambled before making a point, but Schoenfeld said it taught him to have the patience to listen, a virtue that Mr. Stringfellow showed unfailingly with others.

“He was a character of the Tenderloin. And there’s a hole in our hearts. I don’t know how we can be the same without his love. I never thought of this place as a sanctuary until I worked here. Arnold was not the strongest, but I adored the man.”

“I hope he knew his life mattered.”

Mr. Stringfellow often bought Grandma’s Cookies in the vending machine. Allison Ulrich, the assistant general manager, kidded that he was getting grandmother love.

Oh yes, she said he would reply, “I can’t live without it.”

Rev. Glenda Hope, who conducted the memorial, concluded by saying: “Let’s all live so people will say about us what was said about Arnold.” ■

— TOM CARTER