

PHOTO BY MARK ELLINGER

SAMUEL 'SHORTY' LAGASCA Never backed down

Samuel "Shorty" Lagasca, a fighter for tenants' rights who spent the last four decades periodically homeless or living in a succession of Tenderloin and Sixth Street SROs, died May 13 at the Raman Hotel — his home for the past five years. He was 69.

He stood about 5 feet tall and claimed to be a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America. His knowledge of and love for food, particularly Filipino cuisine, was well-known.

At his May 24 memorial at the Raman, Jana Drakka, a Zen Buddhist priest, reminded friends: "We're here to celebrate Shorty's life. He was tall in spirit, so don't cry about him." The mourners present shared Shorty stories.

Mr. Lagasca battled alcohol and drug abuse, served time in state prisons, lost his first wife to illness and his second to an automobile accident. In recent years, pain from a hip operation and the fatigue of battling ulcers racked his small frame, but his spirit never diminished. He was a walker and intimately knew the city's streets.

After years of ill fortune marked by emotional depression and paranoia arising from his combat experiences in Vietnam — where he was twice wounded — he finally brought order into his life. As he did so, he decided to help those around him.

He first became a volunteer for Food Runners, a 27-year-old nonprofit that now boasts more than 200 volunteers collecting perishable food from restaurants, bakeries, grocery stores and farmers' markets and delivering it to the hungry. Shorty once joked that his efforts "got me good hot meals."

In 2001 he became a tenant representative with the Tenderloin Housing Clinic's Central City SRO Collaborative, organizing tenants and trying to improve conditions at his home at the Drake Hotel. Mr. Lagasca once described the Eddy Street SRO as "hell" in the times before THC took over its operation. He was a compelling organizer and relentless advocate. If he saw something not right, he spoke up against it.

Paul Hogarth of the Tenderloin Housing Clinic recalled a time when he and Mr. Lagasca were preparing a flyer to draw tenants to a meeting. "Shorty told me: 'Make it read that attendance is mandatory,'" Hogarth said. "When I protested that you couldn't make people attend, Shorty said, 'Why not? They all promised me they'd come anyway.'"

Once at the Drake, a tenant was wielding a knife, threatening residents. Mr. Lagasca tried to defuse the problem without success. He ended up calling for police help, but everything went wrong and the cops shot and killed the tenant. Some blamed Shorty, and he felt bad. He was persuaded to see a therapist, who later assured Hogarth, "Shorty will be all right. He's a strong person."

That's the way Alison Murphy, a social worker with Citywide Roving Team, remembered Mr. Lagasca, too. "He was very resilient. If it became important to Shorty, you heard about it and he would try to make it your priority as

well," she said. Murphy recalled walking with him recently. "It took forever. Everybody stopped him and wanted to talk. He was the Mayor of Sixth Street."

Mark Ellinger, the neighborhood photographer who first met Mr. Lagasca in 2001 when he joined the SRO Collaborative, recalled the pain of seeing him grow frailer in the past year. "I'll remember his strength. You always spoke eye-to-eye with Shorty," said Ellinger, who tops 6 feet tall.

Drakka ended the memorial with a reminder that everyone has problems. "Like Shorty, we should stick to our guns," she said and read from the poem "Wild Geese" by Mary Oliver:

*Tell me about despair, yours, and I
will tell you mine.*

Meanwhile the world goes on. ■

— Jonathan Newman

DONALD BUSCH Native son, recently homeless

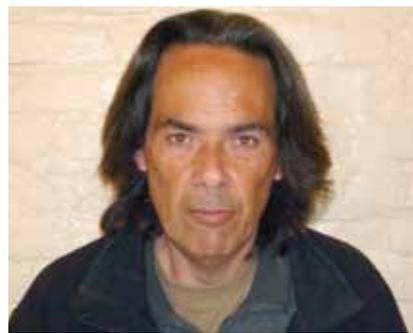


PHOTO COURTESY OF CAMELOT HOTEL

Who can say if Donald Busch's life was on a sustainable uptick when the San Francisco native was found May 15 in his Camelot Hotel room dead of unknown causes.

Previously homeless and in and out of SROs for many years, Mr. Busch had become a Camelot resident not even three weeks earlier. He was 47.

The week before he died, Mr. Busch was energized, seemed in good health and recently had led a meditation for a half-dozen people in a Tenderloin community center. That was a first for him and a hint that the dark-haired, handsome, 6-foot-3 man was more "stabilized" than he ever had been, a contrast to his life's "negative base" that all were reluctant to describe. That was according to professionals attending who worked with him the last year or two and didn't want to be identified.

To Rev. Glenda Hope, who conducted the memorial, Mr. Busch's death seemed to fit a sad pattern. Some people on the street struggle so to survive while battling other difficulties, such as mental illness and addictions, that when they are at last carefree in the lap of comfort, they take their final rest.

"We often see this," Hope said, "someone dying quickly after they have arrived." They can give up and let go what she describes at the end of every memorial — "the fever of life."

Mr. Busch was born and raised in San Francisco and went to St. Paul's Catholic School in Noe Valley, according to Camelot Manager Toby Baldwin, who had few other details. A copy of a color photo of Mr. Busch leaned against a floral arrangement on a table at the front of the community room.

Other mourners said that in conversation, Mr. Busch often had profound insights and "at times was really articulate." He wasn't judgmental and was interested in trying new programs. They said he intimated he had played with 1980s and '90s rock 'n' roll bands, but they didn't know what instrument or which bands.

Ultimately, to the Camelot community who did not know him, Mr. Busch's life and death were what Baldwin called "a head scratcher," ending, though, in a safe and comfortable home. ■

— Tom Carter

OBITUARIES

WANDA JUNE HILL Disarmingly punctual

The memorial at Alexander Residence to honor the life of Wanda June Hill opened softly with the sounds of 1950s Elvis, Ms. Hill's favorite, crooning spirituals. A table with a flotilla of framed family photos surrounding a green and gold urn holding Ms. Hill's ashes graced the front of the community room. Two Mexican votive candles — *veladoras* — burned beneath a photograph of the Golden Gate Bridge, the setting sun burnishing the red towers.

Ms. Hill, a 16-year resident of the Alexander, died from lung cancer April 19 at Laguna Honda Hospital where she'd been for a year. She was 83.

At the end of World War II, a teenage Ms. Hill and her family wandered west from El Dorado Springs, Mo., stopping first in New Mexico and later in small towns in California's Central Valley. When she reached San Francisco, she found home.

Sister Irene, chaplain at St. Anthony's Foundation, asked the gathering to share memories of Ms. Hill. "The reason for memorials is to honor our time on Earth," she said.

Neighbor Marvis Phillips said of his friend: "Wanda always said she loved to watch the ships come in and she loved sailors. When the fleet came in, she said, all of Market Street came alive. I miss her companionship daily."

Her daughters, Sadie Weir of San Francisco and Sharon Cragg of Oakland, recalled a mother who never smoked, drank or learned to drive. They remember as children living in the Mission, a driving lesson that ended quickly when Mom drove through a neighbor's fence and struck a garbage can.

"No more driving after that. Mom walked and took Muni everywhere the rest of her life," said Weir.

And she valued punctuality. "I re-



HILL FAMILY PHOTO

member Mom saying she was five minutes late for an appointment once. It gave her heart palpitations," Cragg said.

Following the death of her husband, Donald Weir, in 1979, Ms. Hill became a professional housekeeper, working on assignment through Aunt Ann's Agency for 15 years. "She was up every day at 5:30 a.m. Coming or going, that's when you saw her. Always with makeup and smartly dressed," Weir said.

Ms. Hill moved to the Alexander in 1997. She said she wanted to be where the action is. Most days she walked to the Salvation Army, for years over to Harrison Street, more recently to the Army's new place on Turk Street for senior lunches, returning to the Alexander for a few hours of lobby sitting. "She was an official greeter and led by example," said resident Michael Nulty.

He noted that Ms. Hill was an early supporter of Alliance for a Better District 6 and a founding member of Central City Democrats in 2006. The Alliance honored her with a Civic Engagement Award in 2010.

Her friend, Darwin Golden, arrived late for the memorial all apologetic. "Wanda was always on me for being late all the time," he said. "For her, I'll try to be more punctual. I promise." ■

— Jonathan Newman



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