OBITUARIES

JAZZIE COLLINS

Poverty hero

An uneasy black youngster born to a teenage mother in a poor Memphis family that grew to 10 ended his life of being shunted off to foster families by hopping on a bus to San Francisco, arriving alone at 19.

It was 1988. The high school dropout had wrestled for years with his sexual identity. As a Jobs Corps graduate he took construction jobs and worked as a hospital orderly before embracing a war against injustice as a social activist and becoming a new personality. In his late 40s, he finally transformed into a woman, gained great confidence, became a well-known advocate for transgender rights, the aged, the homeless and dispossessed in settings from community meetings to City Hall.

Ms. Jazzie Collins, a familiar sight in SoMa, had bright eyes, toothy smile and ropy hair. She lived for her work, was energized by it, then was honored for it at just the right place and time — on the floor of the California Legislature the month before she died at age 54.

Five publications, including the Chronicle, wrote obituaries. She was given three memorials.

The improbable achievements of Jazzie Collins, who touched hundreds of people, defined her — and the city of San Francisco. Here, at the edge of the continent, a permissive atmosphere of discovery is encouraged.

In declining health for a couple of weeks, Ms. Collins, who battled HIV/AIDS for years, died July 11 at Kaiser Permanente Hospital of undetermined causes. Friends surrounded her and sang to her as she passed.

For 10 years, Ms. Collins lived in one of the 88 SRO units at the 1190 Howard Apartments. On July 25, the residents held a memorial for her in the community room attended by two dozen people and conducted by Rev. Glenda Hope.

"Jazzie was a pagan," Hope began, adding that the two had had interesting discussions about it over the years. Hope wore street clothes, absent her black suit and clerical collar with the small gold cross hanging from her neck.

"And she was one of the 10 most unforgettable characters I have known in my 40 years in the Tenderloin," Hope said. "She and I both believed in the unity of life" with the goal of "being involved in compassion."

"She was real," a woman said, then read a poem that ended, "I am not afraid, remember me."

A man who knew Ms. Collins for five years and lived three doors away on the third floor, said when he learned of her death he walked the streets restlessly for hours unable to get her out of his mind. "Her stars were bursting in the sky," he said, fighting back tears, "and her colors are beautiful."

"I didn't kick it with Jazzie," said Larry Freeman. But he recalled being in the elevator one day with her. She went on and on about various political actions and her life, a soliloquy that seemed to drag on for hours. "I could write a play, 'Riding the Elevator with Miss Jazzie,'" he said with a smile. "I know she wasn't a Christian, but I think she's sitting now at the right hand of God."

"Amen." said a woman in the back.

One man said he was apprehensive about her until he finally talked to her and was inspired by her courage and achievements. He knew then the city that knows how was real, and he was relieved. "I knew I could fly my flag without being judged," he said, not bothering to explain the metaphor.

Ms. Collins had that effect on people. She was a woman of action, a changed person, ready to confront injustice anywhere; causes were always foremost in her life and she encouraged others to join in.



Photo by Christopher D. Cook

A friend reminisced on the Internet that one day James Collins showed up to work on tenants' causes in the Mission wearing a dress, a wig and makeup. "She said in a deep voice, 'Call me Jazzie, FROM NOW ON!'"

Her work began in earnest in 2002. She organized Plaza Hotel tenants to speak up for their rights and for keeping the hotel as affordable housing, as the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency wrecking ball drew near.

SRO tenants' rights occupied her throughout her career as a community activist. She also helped in the food pantry system and became a regular, testifying at City Hall. In 2004, she was a staffer on South of Market Community Action Network organizing immigrant and low-income neighbors.

She had worked on Chris Daly's successful campaign for supervisor and he appointed her to the SoMa Community Stabilization Fund Advisory Committee in 2006. It established a process to direct millions of dollars that the city, led by Daly's negotiating, forced luxury SoMa condo builders to set aside for neighborhood enhancements, much like the community benefit agreements by the Twitter tax-break firms now. She chaired the committee for three years and helped create the West SoMa Plan to distribute the money.

She had worked at Senior and Disability Action (formerly Senior Action Network) for four years at the time of her death. "Her work, bettering people, was her life," said a black man from the senior organization.

One of Ms. Collins' personal victories was losing her fear of public speaking. Even if her words were sometimes indistinct, she spoke with confidence, a feeling that heightened when she stood up for transgender issues and other battles she was engaged in.

She had served five years on the board of the Trans March, which precedes the annual Gay Pride Parade, and was vice chair of the city's LGBT Aging Policy Task Force.

The California Legislative Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Caucus honored her for her work in a ceremony on the Assembly floor in the Capitol during LGBT History Month in June.

Tony Robles, who also worked with her there, read a free-verse poem, "Sweet Tea," that he wrote about the day she received her award in Sacramento. He called her a "poverty hero."

"She volunteered to run monthly housing meetings," Robles said, "and often knew more details about process than the staff. And recently she was taking GED classes."

Canon Kip, where she knew scores of people, held a memorial for her and Senior & Disability Action held one Aug.1 at Mission High School.

"Her total affirmation of all people," Hope said, was her legacy. "Let us be empowered by her memory. We very much loved Jazzie."

Hope read a personal note from someone who had known Ms. Collins 10 years, and before the sex change. The writer, who will be anonymous, described watching a man approaching middle age, walking with a cane, angry, moving awkwardly, beginning to open-

ly question his identity, seeking advice

from friends, cautiously inching out.

"Who she ended up being was such a different person than who she was when I first met her," Hope quoted the writer. "It was a huge lesson to me in how much it costs when we hold back or hide who we are and when I am with people how important it is to be open to whatever is presented so that no one should ever feel that they can-

not be their whole self in my presence.

"It was so wonderful to be part of Jazzie's life and transition — both in life and to death, to have a whole community of folks there, caring, making decisions and being with her in a way that was uniquely Jazzie. There were at least a dozen of us in the room, young, old, trans, elected, every ethnicity — singing, holding hands, supporting each other and sending all our love with her as she passed."

The writer was reminded, as others said they had been, of the Beattles song, "Blackbird":

Blackbird singing in the dead of night, take these broken wings and learn to fly, all your life you were only waiting for this moment to arrive.

— Tom Carter

PAUL PERNICE Books were large in his life

A handful of books in the Arlington Hotel's beautifully renovated meeting

room is likely to grow into a large, in-house lending library of eclectic selections dedicated to resident Paul Pernice, a passionate reader.

"Paul and I both loved music, good food and good

books. He filled a part of my heart," said George LaFrancis, a longtime friend and fellow resident. LaFrancis was among the more than 30 people at a July 10 memorial for Mr. Pernice, and his suggestion that everyone contribute books to expand the library was met with enthusiasm.

Mr. Pernice had died four days earlier, age 75, possibly of a heart attack, said Melissa Eaton, the hotel's resident-services manager. Found July 2 in his room, in his wheelchair, disoriented and not fully responsive, he was rushed to the emergency room at S.F. General and died there July 6.

His reading and intellectual curiosity were recurring themes.

"Paul and I passed books back and forth all the time," said neighbor Steven Hatch. "I'd read something I liked, and he would, too, and we'd trade. This morning, I was reading a book and thought, 'I'll have to tell Paul about this.' I can't anymore. It makes me so sad."

LaFrancis said he didn't think that Mr. Pernice was formally educated. "He was an autodidact but very well-read, even in classic literature."

The memorial was officiated by Sister Katie O'Shea from St. Vincent de Paul Society, also a good friend of Mr. Pernice during his 12 years at the Arlington. He lived there in 2009 when Mercy Housing bought the building and took over resident services, formerly provided by St. Vincent's. And he was there in 2011 when major renovations transformed the hotel from a somewhat decrepit 1908 structure into 154 units with kitchenettes, private bathrooms and extensive support services for its special-needs residents.

"Paul was so grateful for all that happened here," Sister Katie said. "He had serious health issues, but he had good care and many friends in this hotel community, and he was buoyed by his faith. Sometimes we read horoscopes together, sometimes Scripture. We talked about forgiveness a lot. Once in a while he scowled — but rarely."

When she asked people to share their memories of Mr. Pernice, resident Ron Hardesty held up his left hand, swaddled in bandages, which he said he'd broken a few days before. "I was putting on my tennis shoes this morning — hard to do with one hand — and there was Paul, standing in front of me laughing away at me trying to get it on." Hardesty was sure Mr. Pernice was in the room for the memorial, too, watching all of them.

Kelly Blanford fondly remembered her former neighbor, reportedly a tall man of some girth. "He was a little devil inside in his own way. He loved to gossip, and he'd always catch me up on what was going on here at the hotel."

Another recurring theme at the memorial: Mr. Penice loved to talk about people, but always lovingly, without malice.

Joe Garvey, the Arlington's former activities manager, recalled the first time he met Mr. Pernice. "He pulled me aside and said he'd give me a run-down of the hotel's politics, who to avoid and whose good side to get on. He just savored the details of life" — the book club he was in, cooking classes, watching reruns of his favorite TV series, "Perry Mason," and Bingo.

Bingo, a staple activity at the Arlington years ago, was brought back recently, due mostly to Mr. Pernice's persistence, Eaton said. And he won twice before he died, a thrill for him and now a bittersweet memory for hotel staff and residents.

Little was known about his past life, but his accent gave away his roots in the Bronx. Sister Katie said he was Sicilian "on both sides of his family," and a brother survives him in New York. A resident said Mr. Pernice told him he had moved to San Francisco in 1973.

Said some of his friends, he "brought cohesion and understanding to the Arlington," "was gentle and kind and a person you could depend on," "could be grouchy but mostly was fun-loving and incredibly generous," and "read his horoscope every day."

Frank Newsome, Arlington resident for 20 years, said he and Mr. Pernice "connected in a thousand different ways. I'll miss him so much — he made me feel honored when he asked me to do things with him and for him."

"Whenever you have a book, think of Paul," Sister Katie said.

— Marjorie Beggs