

WILLIAM McLEROY 'The Piano Man'

If you walked the narrow streets in the Financial District, or shopped at Heart of the City Farmers Market, or hung out at the cable car turnaround on Powell Street any time in the last 15 years, chances are you caught the jaunty notes of a ragtime tune from an electric piano keyboard sounding through the air from a small portable amplifier.

The piano player was William McLeroy, tall, thin with a mop of red hair. Mr. McLeroy died of cancer Aug. 30. He was 56 years old.

A dozen friends gathered Sept. 13 at the Arlington Hotel, Mr. McLeroy's last home, to celebrate his life and to remember a quiet man of soft-spoken politeness.

"Yeah, The Piano Man. That's what I called him. We met at Medical Respite (a convalescent hospital) about 10 months ago. We both moved into the Arlington the same day," Darren Barrett said. "Both of us were into keyboards. He said he was from New Orleans.

"I don't know if he had any next of kin. He never mentioned family. He was a heavy smoker and he used to be a heavy drinker. When you played in those clubs, they kept the liquor flowing," Barrett added.

Before he became a street musician, Mr. McLeroy played at many small joints and bars in San Francisco, mostly around Union Square. But he was proudest of the newspaper write-ups his street playing earned, often showing friends old Herb Caen columns where his ragtime style was noted as a colorful part of the cityscape, or when he was gulled by bystanders who told him they had spotted his stolen piano wheeling down "Harmony Lane."

Melissa Eaton, resident-services manager at the Arlington, recalled



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARLINGTON

when she first met Mr. McLeroy. She addressed him formally and Mr. McLeroy corrected her. "I'm from New Orleans. It's pronounced Mac-Leroy," he said. In truth, he was not fussy about his name, friends recalled. "You could call him William, or Tim, or 'Red' and he'd answer you as always," Barrett said.

His neighbor, Frank, recalled first hearing Mr. McLeroy playing his keyboard last Thanksgiving at the Arlington. "I told him, 'Sounds like you got some soul.' He could make that thing talk. It touched you."

His friend, Evelyn Lim, also met Mr. McLeroy at the Department of Public Health's Medical Respite. "I once told him I envied the way he played. I only learned to play by ear," Lim said. "Like this?" she said, Mr. McLeroy joked, gently tapping the side of his head against the keyboard. Lim pantomimed his action.

She remembered when Mr. McLeroy played at the farmers' market last December. It was chilly and damp and tips were low. "You've got to play

Christmas carols," Lim told him. Mr. McLeroy hated Christmas tunes, but finally agreed. After an uptempo medley of "Silent Night" and "O, Come All Ye Faithful," the bills and coins started to drop in the plastic bucket Mr. McLeroy kept nestled beside his amp. A small crowd gathered, recording his playing on cell phones. Mr. McLeroy was happy, but he always insisted he got more money in his bucket when he played on Irving Street out in the Inner Sunset.

Barrett closed the celebration. "He's not suffering anymore. He's in that place of peace and serenity." "Amen," came the reply. Lim played Scott Joplin's "The Entertainer." She may get to keep Mr. McLeroy's old keyboard, a Yamaha PSR E323 plus his Crate amplifier. ■

— Jonathan Newman

BRENDA 'BUCKIE' BOWMAN Spoke from the heart

Brenda Bowman — her friends knew her as "Buckie" — died July 19 at the Arlington Hotel, her home for the past 15 years. Her death at 56 was unexpected.

Ms. Bowman, an only child, was born in Natchez, Miss. She lost her mother as an infant and had no contact with her father. About 40 years ago, she traveled west with a boyfriend and when they reached San Francisco, she decided to stay. Her friends said she often spoke of her youth in the South with a warm nostalgia.

At her Aug. 1 memorial at the Arlington, Rev. Glenda Hope softly reminded friends: "We're here to honor the life and mourn the death of one who lived among us." She asked the mourners to share stories of Ms. Bowman.

Johnnie Norris Jr. lived across the hall from her. "Her death was questionable. She was young. She was a loving

person, gave me food. I still can't believe it. It hasn't hit me yet," Norris said.

Her doctor, Monica Gandhi, an award-winning physician and teacher at S.F. General Hospital and a noted author of texts used to train clinicians treating HIV/AIDS patients, recalled an affectionate Ms. Bowman. "When I saw her she was always expressive. She always spoke from the heart," Dr. Gandhi said.

In 2009, Ms. Bowman became a patient at S.F. General's Ward 86, a clinic famous for its cutting-edge treatment of HIV infections. She had contracted pneumonia the previous year and her HIV disease was discovered during her recovery. Ms. Bowman was an exemplary patient, Gandhi said, taking her med cocktails regularly and steadily improving throughout her treatment.

Melissa Eaton, the SRO's resident services manager, remembered Bowman as warm-hearted: "She was fully involved in all our activities here. She was always a bright spot in my day."

A man named Frank spoke. "She was a warrior. If she saw something not right, she was on it, and she was big enough to admit it, when she was wrong. I'm going to miss her."

Her neighbor, Ms. Vee, recalled, "She always called me Mama. I told her, 'If I was your Mama, I'd probably tan your bottom.' But she was a good friend and, if she was your friend, she was your friend for life."

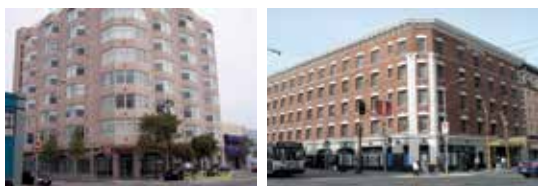
After the memorial, Dr. Gandhi reflected: "Her death is shocking. She was thriving, doing well, taking her medications. We'll know more when the coroner's report comes in. She was a very loving and extremely grateful person in the clinic who always appreciated anything that was done for her.

"We will all miss her terribly at Ward 86," Dr. Gandhi said. ■

— Jonathan Newman



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Building	Size/Occupancy Limit	Max./Min. Income-Limit	Rent
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EVENT

Thursday, October 17 • 7:30 – 10 a.m.



A Celebration of Neighborhood Entrepreneurs with Urban Solutions

Hotel Whitcomb Ballroom – Central Market

1231 Market Street, San Francisco

- BUFFET BREAKFAST
- NETWORKING
- AWARDS PRESENTATION
Neighborhood Small Business Awards Winners:
SOMA Supermarket and Bumzy's Chocolate Chip Cookies
- PANEL DISCUSSION



Reshaping Central Market:

The importance of small businesses in the community fabric

Moderated by **Sydnie Kohara**, former CNBC/KPIX 5 News Anchor
PANELISTS: **Amy Cohen**, Director of Neighborhood Business Development, San Francisco Office of Economic and Workforce Development
J.K. Dineen, Reporter, San Francisco Business Times
Henry Karnilowicz, President, District Council Merchants

Event tickets: \$100 per person



Since 1992, Urban Solutions has been helping small businesses in the Central City area, providing assistance with business planning, financing, financial education, lease negotiations, marketing, and job creation. The organization's mission is to strengthen underserved neighborhoods by supporting small businesses, job creation, diversity and sustainability.

INFO: www.urbansolutionsSF.org or call 415-553-4433 x106