

## STEPHANI SANTANA

### The Hamlin's mom to many

Everybody in the Tenderloin should have a sendoff like Stephani Santana got at the Hamlin Hotel Sept. 11 — a big crowd of friends loving her and sharing memories through their laughter and tears, beautiful music being sung, a minister offering prayers, red paper hearts on the walls proclaiming love, and a cornucopia of food.

Ms. Santana earned it with her personality. Her giving nature touched so many residents and outside friends alike. Some felt she was their second mother.

"Gone but never forgotten," read an inscription under a photo on a flyer. The photo was taken in the community room where the memorial was held and it showed the hearts on the walls around Ms. Santana who was holding on to her walker while hooked up with a tube to the oxygen she needed day and night.

Her health had declined over two years. Even so, she helped prepare the hotel's monthly wellness breakfast. "She was a great asset," said Azizi Gupton, social worker. "I talked to her every day."

Ms. Santana, a 13-year Hamlin resident, was asthmatic and had heart trouble. She died Aug. 30 in her room with her oxygen tank near, a week before her birthday. She was 59.

New York-born, she had a Brooklyn accent one friend said was hard to understand at first. Ms. Santana had recently returned to the hotel from S.F. General against her doctor's wishes. Her brother had already moved some things out of her room, expecting she'd go into hospice care elsewhere. But the Hamlin was home.

Only a dozen mourners showed up at the appointed time for the memorial, but then the room slowly filled until all the seats were taken and people stood along the walls decorated with leftover red hearts from Valentine's Day, and spilled out the door into the lobby — 47 people in all — as emotions kicked in.

"There's a lot of diversity in this room," said Rev. Paul Trudeau, who led the memorial. And as he read the 23rd Psalm, some mourners echoed familiar phrases like the "shadow of death," "fearing no evil" and "my cup runneth over."

The statuesque soprano, Molly Mahoney, who teaches children's classes for the San Francisco Opera, sang "I'll



PHOTO COURTESY OF HAMLIN HOTEL

### Stephani Santana at an earlier event at the Hamlin.

Fly Away" in the suddenly quiet room.

Angela Harris, who knew Ms. Santana seven years, had just come out of the hospital. She stood and gripped a chair. "My kids loved her," she said with difficulty in a raspy voice. "She was such a helpful person. I used to pick her up for lunch. I met her brothers. She's not gone, just gone to a better place. I want everyone to know that she'll be loved. And so will everyone here."

"Amen," the mourners murmured. Donell Henderson, a maintenance man, knew her 10 years. He had once lived at the Hamlin for 14 months and often went to the grocery for her. She gave him good advice, "wisdom," he called it, to help him stay out of trouble. He had been in prison when his own mother, a Hamlin resident, had died and he later came to live at the SRO. "She was like a mom to me," Henderson said. "I just saw her two or three weeks ago.

Two days ago, I heard she passed."

A man named Mike stood and said: "She was one of the nicest people I've ever known, and if more people were like her we'd all be a lot better off."

She was "a lovable woman," another said.

Andrew Mark had extensive notes he had written about Ms. Santana. He is the new president of the Hamlin Tenants Association, having been elected after Ms. Santana put his name in the hat. The tall, thin man was formally dressed in dark pin-striped suit and tie, and spoke with feeling and humor, beginning with the funny sound Ms. Santana made when she had too much to drink: "Eeyee-eeeyee eeyee!"

"Huh?" Mark said he'd respond, then she'd blurt out, "I love you!"

The mourners laughed. Ms. Santana had "the grand gift" of being able to relate to everyone, he said, no matter what it took. She could cajole or sweet-talk anyone into doing things for her, from being an "errand boy" to being her "therapist."

The mourners nodded and smiled. She loved company, and if she could help anyone she would. "But if you asked her for help, she'd cuss you out. "But Stephani," Mark continued, "could not bring herself to hurt anyone. And you could see it in her eyes that she'd been hurt.

"It's so hard to say goodbye to yesterday," he said.

Sasha said when she was in the hospital recovering from a serious operation her mother never called her, but Ms. Santana, despite her own failing health, called her every day. Sasha couldn't hold back the tears. "She

called me four times," she managed to say. "She watched me grow up. She was like a mother to me."

"Now you're making me cry," said a woman next to her.

"I miss her and I love her," yelled a man in back.

Mahoney sang "Over the Rainbow." When the notes weren't soaring you could hear a pin drop in the now close, muggy room, where the hearts had handwritten interpretations of love like "Love is limitless," "Love is hard, scary," "Love is peace within yourself first," "Love is the earth, sea, moon and stars," and "Love is cannabis meditation."

When it was over, the mourners surrounded a table laden with cold cuts, vegetables, cheeses, crackers, rice, fried chicken, teriyaki chicken, potato salad, gravy, sodas, even candy, contributed by Community Housing Partnership, City Impact, residents and outside friends.

Mark helped serve until he sat for a breather.

"Her brother called her every day," he said, "and when she was talking you could see the love she had for him in her eyes." Her brother lives in the Bay Area but didn't attend. Ms. Santana also had another brother, two daughters, a son and six grandchildren, all living out of state.

"We celebrated her birthday Sept. 10, too," Mark added. "Right here in this room. About 10 of us, and we had a cake."

Then he helped three residents clean up and put away the folding chairs for another time when they'd use the room with the old valentines. ■

— Tom Carter

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