

GARTH FERGUSON Rock-solid activist

Two dozen activists and nonprofit leaders gathered Dec. 3 to memorialize a fellow social justice warrior who waged the good fight for five decades, helped them form their organizations and left them an inspiring legacy to keep the struggle going.

The craggy Garth Ferguson, gruff-looking and well-known in public demonstrations and for behind-the-scenes planning, cast a “long shadow,” his friends said. He was hard-driving, cantankerous, yet impish if not humorous. They talked reverently of his clarity of purpose, vision, steadfastness and the fact he was “doing it for us.” He was rooted in the notion that poor people should represent themselves.

Mr. Ferguson was a founder of the Coalition on Homelessness in 1987.

“He spent a lot of time (with us) in the early days,” said Jennifer Friedenbach, executive director. “He was the moral compass for the Coalition, and he always came back at the times we needed him. He was essential in keeping us on track and staying true to what we were fighting for.”

“He did the work for decades. Here’s to a beautiful man.”

Two other neighborhood nonprofit fixtures that Mr. Ferguson helped create were Hospitality House in 1967 and later, as an early advocate of peer-to-peer counseling, the Self Help Center.

“Garth was the face of what we were fighting for,” said Joe Wilson, a 30-year veteran of Hospitality House who now manages its Community Building Program. Wilson met Mr. Ferguson years ago at a demonstration. “He was a kind of poet and warrior with an impish quality. He cast quite a shadow. He made you think maybe this can work — that something good can happen here. And I want to thank him for continuing to remind us.”

Community Housing Partnership organizer James Tracy said when he once invited Mr. Ferguson to speak at a weeks-long training for organizers, he almost seemed miffed. “It was like how dare you ask me just to speak when I should be running the whole program,” which got a knowing laugh.

“Garth,” added Rev. Glenda Hope, who came out of retirement to lead the memorial, “always showed up. And we should do more of these things for people when they are still alive.”

Cantankerous sometimes, yes, acknowledged Jackie Jenks, Hospitality House executive director. But it was easy to take because “you knew where it was coming from.”

Mr. Ferguson also co-founded People Organized to Win Employment Rights, POWER, in 1997 to advocate for low-income tenants, workers and transit riders. Co-founder and former Exec-

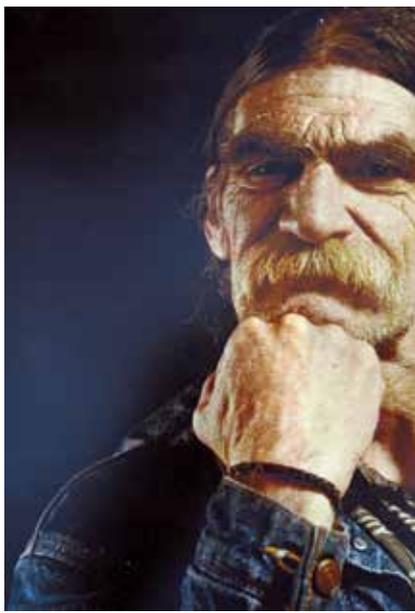


PHOTO COURTESY OF POWER

utive Director Steve Williams who had worked with him — “he could be a pain in the ass” — gave an unexpected version of Mr. Ferguson’s “vision.”

“He got hit by more cars and Muni buses than anyone I know,” Williams said. “Muni drivers didn’t have a vendetta against him — his vision was bad.”

But Mr. Ferguson’s insight was evident, Williams said, recalling once when POWER members were nervous and tentative. It was under a threat from unions Williams didn’t name, and Mr. Ferguson settled them down. POWER had been demonstrating against the unions for not including General Assistance recipients they represented at the table. The unions threatened to diss POWER in public and never work with them again unless they stopped, Williams said. Mr. Ferguson said POWER had nothing to lose, everything to gain.

“Garth scrunched up his face and said this wasn’t a new thing,” Williams said, “and that they (the unions) never had worked with us. It was his clear vision. And we kept on demonstrating. Garth represented the idea that poor people should stand up for themselves.”

The memorial was in the community room of 555 Ellis St., the low-cost family apartments whose creation the now-retired Glenda Hope, as head of Network Ministries, spearheaded in 1995.

Mr. Ferguson, homeless off and on, had been involved with Network Ministries since it was formed in 1972, Hope said. Mr. Ferguson once was a longtime Tenderloin resident, but the past 14 years he lived in low-cost housing in South Park where he was a force as a low-cost housing advocate before he went entering hospice. Hope had visited him several times in his final days, she said, much of the time spent in silence. Mr. Ferguson was ravaged by cancer he had fought for some time

and died Sept. 24. He was 68.

On a table inside the door was a stack of Mr. Ferguson’s biographies with his domineering, poster-quality likeness filling the cover showing his large fist beneath his bearded chin and solemn, lived-in face. Penetrating eyes and thick, dark eyebrows made him a symbol of toughness, an image looming larger than his thin, 5-foot-9 frame would suggest. At the bottom, above his name and sunrise-sunset dates, was the phrase: “Keep in the struggle because we will win.” The image was also for the taking on 50 buttons on the table.

At the front of the room, slides showing Mr. Ferguson interacting at meetings and demonstrations flashed continuously on a small screen.

Little was known about his early life. Born Russell Allen Galena, the first of 12 children and apparently abused by a parent, the biography said, he left home early, kicking around the lower 48 before settling in San Francisco and changing his name. Active as soon as his feet hit the ground, in 1967, according to his biography, he became a member of “the first known gay youth organization,” Vanguard, a group at Glide.

As riveting as homelessness and all twists of social injustice were to Mr. Ferguson, though, AIDS awareness was likely his major calling.

“Of all Garth’s activism, his proudest was with the San Francisco AIDS vigil from 1985-1994,” the biography said. “At the height of official intransigence, public bigotry, misinformation and hysteria, the vigil maintained a presence in the United Nations Plaza

24 hours a day and became one of the longest acts of continuous civil disobedience in American history. Garth held vigil and provided compassionate and open peer education, grief counseling and advocacy.”

Plaza demonstrators demanded that the federal government condemn AIDS-related discrimination and put up \$500 million to search for its cure. As people died all around them — at least 20 perished at the vigil site — the activists in the plaza’s tent town became an important hub to disseminate news of new developments, collect names of deceased AIDS victims and gather international AIDS news from concerned foreign tourists who stopped by.

A relentless storm finally ended the vigil.

“I was there the whole time,” Mr. Ferguson told the Bay Area Reporter about living in a tent for nine years. “There was a five-day rainstorm and the wind just took all of our stuff and blew it away. There was no place for us to stay.”

A 2011 resolution by Supervisor David Campos to recognize the vigils’ importance with a commemorative plaque passed but never was implemented. Resolutions, explained Campos aide Nathan Albee, do not have the force of law.

Still, Mr. Ferguson’s commitment to the demonstration and a lifetime of activism stands him tall in the memory of his friends, but he’s otherwise anonymous in the historic vigil alongside his fellow fallen activists. ■

— Tom Carter

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