



MARSHAL COUSINS

NICOLAS DE RUIJG
'He gave you love'

Nicolas "Nico" de Ruijg's path through life brought him from Europe to the United States, from the excitement of the mid-1960s swinging London to the comfort of academic life on the East Coast in the '70s and '80s. Then years living on the streets of San Francisco in an alcoholic haze before a lengthy final chapter as a tenant advocate and organizer and beloved member of the SoMa community and his adopted church.

Family and friends gathered to reminisce and honor him at a memorial service at Canon Kip, his home for his last 13 years, and again five days later at the Episcopal Church of St. John the Evangelist in the Inner Mission, where he had been a constant presence even longer.

Among the dozen people in the Canon Kip community room were his cousin, Carola, who had traveled with her mother, Trudi, from the Netherlands, in hopes of seeing "our special uncle" before he died. Mr. de Ruijg had been hospitalized with heart disease since September and in hospice care at Laguna Honda since February. He'd had a bypass operation in 2014, a friend said, but "really only got a benefit from it for about three months." He turned 71 in December.

Over and over again, people who shared their memories of Mr. de Ruijg recalled a man of tireless energy, kindness, enthusiasm and good humor. He held court every weekday morning at coffee get-togethers at Canon Kip, and for eight years was a tenant representative at meetings of the Human Services Agency's Shelter Plus Care Oversight Committee.

At Canon Kip, he kept his fellow tenants informed of goings-on in the community and made sure that no one took themselves too seriously. One of the workers there recalled through her tears how delighted he'd been when they visited him at the hospital and her regret about not having returned as she'd planned.

"He could've moved from here, but he thought this was home," his longtime friend Christopher Santos said.

"I called him my assistant," said Rev. Kathryn Benton, who presided over the memorial May 18. "He always had a prayer ready" at similar events she conducted for Episcopal Community Services over the past five years, she said. At Mr. de Ruijg's memorial, she read from Heraclitus and Job 14:7-9.

"He lived at the bottom, so he didn't take life for granted," said Robert Craig, an official at St. John's, a church at 15th and Julian streets, whose congregation is largely LGBT. "He almost died in the streets. He knew what was important and what was not. He treated everyone with equal respect, regardless of social standing. He would have lunch with the bishop and his wife and the next day help someone off the street. A lot of character."

Similarly, Craig continued, "It didn't matter what his finances were. He was always in a good mood. If someone said something negative, he would make it into a joke. He knew all the bus drivers and was comfortable everywhere he went."

"He gave you love when you didn't have love for yourself," Santos recalled.

Mr. de Ruijg, the youngest of four children, worked on ships as a young man. He met the late poet Ron Schreiber in the Netherlands, and their friendship brought him to London and then New York in the 1960s before a long stretch together in Provincetown, Mass., near Boston, where Schreiber was chair of the English Department at the University of Massachusetts.

When his relationship with Schreiber ended, Mr. de Ruijg shared an apartment in Boston for a few years with Santos and then moved to San Francisco. He worked as a tailor, at one point operating a fabric shop with five female employees, "his girls," Santos said he called them.

He was a fashionable dresser — pictures show him wearing flowing crimson robes — and adept as a tailor and jewelry maker, skills he put to use making children's clothes for pregnant women at shelters and in keeping the St. John's clergy's vestments up to snuff.

But Mr. de Ruijg struggled with alcoholism and was homeless for years. "Nico drunk was not the same as Nico sober," Santos recalled.

He tended to stick around the Castro, where he felt safest, Santos said, and a Noe Street resident whose name he didn't know allowed Mr. de Ruijg to sleep in her carport for three years, as long as he moved on each morning.

He remained friends with Schreiber, too. "When he was on the streets, he'd often turn to Ron for help," Santos said. Santos lost touch with Mr. de Ruijg after moving from Boston to New York, but told a story of how they found each other again many years later:

One day while walking up Castro Street after moving to San Francisco in 2005, "I saw someone at a cash machine who looked remarkably like Nico, shoulder-length white hair, a vest worn sans chemise and festooned with lots of rhinestone brooches. I was so convinced that Nico was lost to me, that initially I walked right by. But then I thought, 'who else in all the world dresses that way?' I still wasn't sure, so I waited for this Nico impersonator to finish his transaction. And when he did, he turned, and we stood there, face to face. And he said, 'Phu-uur.' No one else ever called me that. ... From that moment on, Nico and I picked up right where we left off, as if those 13 years were 13 days."

His niece recalled encountering him on one of her visits to San Francisco in October 1998. She worked as a tour guide, but had not heard from her uncle in some time, so suspected "something was going on." She came out of the Civic Center BART Station one day, she said, "and stood face to face with Nico when he was homeless." Despite his typical attention to his appearance, she said, at this time he was disheveled and dirty, his hair and nose a mess.

He would frequent the Martin De Porres soup kitchen on Potrero, where a woman named Abbey Lehrman took an interest in him. "Do you want to live?" she would repeatedly ask him. "One day, he took her hand and finally started living again." She was able to help him gain supportive housing at Canon Kip and "liked having him around because he was her success story," Santos said.

Although Mr. de Ruijg was raised a Catholic, he was drawn to St. John's. "The first time he came to our church," Craig recalled, "the priest kicked him out because he was drunk."

Craig, head acolyte at the time, invited him to join as an acolyte. By the time of his death, Mr. de Ruijg was serving in Craig's former role. "He was trusted above all others," Craig said. "We called him our St. Nick. He gave everybody what he himself sometimes never got."

Acolytes' chores are typically performed by children attending a church's school, Craig said, but since St. John's congregation is primarily LGBT, those

duties are generally performed by adults.

Pictures showing his mane of long white hair made the St. Nick moniker quite credible.

"He had a great sense of humor and was very loving and kind," one of his social workers said. "Nico was relentless in his quest to give back." ■

— Mark Hedin

ROBERT MOORIS
A gentle man



COURTESY CANON KIP

Canon Kip Community House resident Robert Mooris had the reputation of being a "gentle soul," "a quiet guy," someone who "kept to himself" — so much so that the May 13 memorial for the three-year resident revealed almost no personal information about him.

Rev. Kathryn Benton, co-minister of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, officiated at the gathering in the Canon Kip meeting room at Natoma and Eighth streets. At the front of the room, a table held a photo of Mr. Mooris, candles, a large bouquet of spring flowers and a goblet of water. Mourners included three of Mr. Mooris' neighbors, three Canon Kip staff members and Si-

mon Dinglasan, a social worker from Lutheran Social Services who helped Mr. Mooris for his last six months.

"Robert didn't stand out in a crowd," Dinglasan said. "While he did share some of his vulnerabilities with me, he was a fine, calm soul and I'm going to miss that calm."

Mr. Mooris died May 6, six weeks shy of his 58th birthday.

He died the same day as Nicolas De Ruijg — "Nico" — also a Canon Kip resident.

"I remember waking up that day to loud talking in the hall and hearing Nico's name," recalled Kim Benedetto, who has lived at Canon Kip for eight years. "I thought I was dreaming, and I was shocked later to find out both he and Robert had died."

Benedetto said that Mr. Mooris was always courteous to her when they'd pass, though "he had his moments." She remembered the day that he moved in — his mother was with him — and that most of the time he lived at Canon Kip he left the building early and was gone most of the day.

"I think he knew a lot of people in the neighborhoods around here and that's where he spent his time," she said.

Rosa Spinoza, Canon Kip case manager, called Mr. Mooris "a gentleman, who didn't fight with anyone" and always said hi to staff and neighbors.

After the memorial, The Extra asked Spinoza and other staffers about the significance of the water goblet on the table. It's related to the candles, she said. They light the way for the soul after death, and the water drowns any evil elements that might try to keep the soul from rising.

"And water is about life," another staff member said — a fitting symbol of hope for mourners. ■

— Marjorie Beggs



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