Courtesy of Raman Hotel

This photo *of James Bettancourt with social worker Alison Murphy was displayed during his memorial.*

JAMES BETTANCOURT
'That light shone through'

A dozen men and women gathered in the Raman Hotel community room Feb. 9 to note the death of James Bettancourt, who'd wrought mischief in their lives for as long as anyone there could remember.

"Nobody partied harder than Mr. Bettancourt," Bill said before the memorial ceremony started. Later he added, "He deserves some honor," and suggested a "Legends of the Raman" display, a framed image, which he offered to pay for. "He was a trip," Bill kept repeating.

"I don't have anything good to say about him. He was a mess, period," said another early bird, who called herself Mother Jones. She left before the proceedings began. They were led by Quest4Life lay priest Mira Ingram accompanied by trainee Darryl Starks, attending his second memorial, who sat silently throughout the ceremony.

The remaining mourners — six men, six women, half social workers or hotel staff — remembered Mr. Bettancourt's rascally ways with affection.

"I got attached to the guy," said Craig, a hotel janitor. "He just done his thing, and I done my thing. He was a sight to see, would brighten up your day." He recalled how Mr. Bettancourt would pester him for help with his cell phone. Craig said he'd try to help, but whatever problem he thought he'd solved seemed to immediately resurface once Mr. Bettancourt had returned to his fourth-floor room.

"He watched 'The Hobbit' every day," Craig said later, as personal a detail about Mr. Bettancourt as anyone gave.

The case managers and social workers were careful not to reveal anything that could possibly be a breach of confidentiality. They couldn't even acknowledge him as a client without risking their jobs, so strict is the Department of Public Health's reading of federal HIPAA privacy rules.

After the ceremony, a few details emerged. "He was an early riser," recalled Joye Pulsipher, an eight-year Raman resident. Mr. Bettancourt was "a slow mover, a slow talker. Always minding his own business, he was loved by everybody."

His last day at the hotel he'd passed out, then lingered for two weeks at S.F. General with the help of a ventilator but without regaining consciousness. A worker and some of his neighbors had visited him there on several occasions, one said, whether he realized it or not.

"He was on heroin all his life. But he went on to methadone, and that's what he did every morning of his life," said Bob Stallworth, who said he'd been a Raman resident 12 years and that Mr. Bettancourt had been a neighbor there all the while. "He was real quiet, he didn't bother anyone. He liked to drink milk and eat cereal.

"I just found out two days ago that he passed," Stallworth said, highlighting how, even in the seemingly close-knit hotel community, boundaries are maintained. "There's a whole lot I don't know."

"We'd talk bad to each other, then we'd apologize," said William, seated in his wheelchair. "He always had a wise statement. He always had a smile. He was a nice guy. His greatest problem was, he'd get off the elevator, a snail could beat him" (to the door).

"He leaves behind a trail of broken hearts," one of the social workers said. "He touched a lot of people." She said that, in speaking with his son, she'd asked if he wished to have anything expressed at the memorial. "I'm just glad that he's doing better now, living in a place where people cared about him," she said he'd replied.

"He had a large, nontraditional family!" she agreed.

"I miss him," said Mattie, until recently a longtime desk clerk there. "Mr. B," as some knew him, would work her: "Mattie, have you seen Alison?" (Murphy, UCSF clinical social worker at the Raman) he'd ask. Then, he'd ask about his Human Services Agency worker. "OK, I'm the secretary now?" she'd snap at him.

Another social worker spoke at some length during the memorial. As she got to know Mr. Bettancourt, she said, "We learned to establish some basic boundaries.

"He tried to call me 'baby,' I told him, 'You can't call me baby.'" But recently she'd run into him outside the hotel, where for him such rules didn't apply. "Hey baby, I got some new clothes," he called out to her. "He was so excited, in checks and polka dots," she said, choking up. "I'm gonna miss him. I'm so happy I got to see him before he passed away."

Mr. Bettancourt was high maintenance. "You don't spend any time with me," she said he'd complain, and she had to remind him that she also had other clients with needs, too. "I see you every day." Shortly after she began working at the Raman, she said, she realized he pressured everybody for help.

He smelled funny, she continued, "like milk." She solved that mystery one day when she went to his room. "Cereal," she said, "it was everywhere. He'd take two bites" and either spill the bowl on himself, or on his clothes and furniture, or just leave it.

But she ended her remarks with a repeated nod to "that smile, his kindness and sweetness."

Mr. Bettancourt was able to live on his Social Security benefits "because he worked all his life," another staffer said later. She mentioned a 20-year stint managing a kitchen in Reno and time spent in the merchant marine. "He enjoyed the outdoors, wildlife, rural places and loved to cook and eat," she said. Had the Raman's cooking facilities been better, she said, he might not have loved cereal so much.

Then there was his wheelchair, often in need of attention. "He would always mess with it!" Mattie said. She'd also seen him at other SROs where she has worked. "He would roam to different hotels, he got around."

"He loved his Alison," Mattie recalled, to murmurs of agreement in the room. The photo on the altar, beneath a bouquet of yellow roses behind the incense and a chiming Tibetan bowl, showed the two of them together, with Mr. Bettancourt attacking a plate of waffles and sausages. It was taken at a 2014 Christmas dinner, someone said. "Alison had a way with him."

"Everybody has their glow here," hotel manager Grace Wong, who'd teared up during the ceremony, said in her office afterward. "It's hard to miss. He was very charming … that magic he had to get you energized. No matter what the situation, that light shone through. He loved, loved, loved Alison."

On the phone the next day, Murphy was extremely reluctant to possibly violate Mr. Bettancourt's privacy. But with the photo of them together displayed at the memorial, she couldn't deny the connection. "Our connection did become very strong," she said. "He was absolutely beloved."

A UCSF employee working on a Department of Public Health contract for clinical services, Murphy has been at the Raman since 2006. Mr. Bettancourt was there the whole time.

Murphy had remained mum during the ceremony. After about an hour, as it was concluding, she was called away to a medical emergency upstairs. Out on Howard Street, an ambulance and fire truck sat waiting in the warm afternoon sun as the memorial gathering dispersed. ■

— Mark Hedin

JOHN PATTON
An original Black Panther

John Patton, born in Louisiana, emigrated west at an early age with his parents as WWII ended. He often told his children stories of his boyhood in San Francisco. They listened with skepticism as he hunted pheasants and wild turkeys, corralled cows that had strayed from Butchertown slaughterhouses or the small farms that dotted the hills of Hunters Point.

Mr. Patton, who grew up here at a time when this was still a pastoral city, died of congestive heart failure Feb 2. He was 75.

Mr. Patton was an original member of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, working primarily to implement the group's breakfast for children program in the city. "Dad was a lover of life and a giver to the community. He had a need to feed people," his son, John Jr., said.

Mr. Patton worked many jobs in his lifetime. He was a chef at Foster's, a ubiquitous chain of cafeterias and bakeries that once operated at 28 addresses in San Francisco and throughout the Bay Area. He met his wife-to-be, Dolores, an assistant chef whose famed blackberry cobbler drew loyal diners, at the Foster's at Market and Van Ness.

Photo: Jerry L. Robinson Jr.

John Patton *with daughter, Stephanie Robinson, who recalls he drove the bus that took her to school.*

Mr. Patton drove dump trucks for the companies that built housing at Middle Point and West Point roads and the recently demolished Candlestick Park. For 25 years, he drove school buses, transporting children from home to school and back. For a time, his young passengers included his own children.

Stephanie Robinson, Mr. Patton's daughter, recalled how she worried when she left her home in Hunters Point to go to school in Diamond Heights, at a time the city was busing students to other neighborhoods to redress the de facto school segregation.

"I'd ask him, 'Dad, do I really have to go?' and he'd say, 'Yes, you'll get a better education.' He was right, of course,"

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