



PHOTO BY CARL ANGEL

## Remembering Jay, Market St. newsie

**Longtime newsie Jay Broussard often brought his blue macaw to his kiosk at Seventh and Market.**

BY PHIL TRACY

EVERYBODY remembers the parrots. The business agent for Local 468 Newspaper Vendors Union couldn't remember much else about longtime newsie Jay Broussard. But he did recall that Jay and Herb Hart, Jay's life partner, had brought birds to their Seventh and Market kiosk: a bright blue macaw, an African gray, a snow white cockatoo, and a green Amazon.

It's what the man in the Chronicle circulation department remembered, the woman who works at Merrill's Drug Store near the kiosk and others I spoke with about Jay. What strangers remember most about Jay are his birds.

But for his friends, Jay Broussard will be remembered for much more than the colorful and personable parrots he and Herb looked after. Jay died March 2 after a lingering illness. He was 71.

Jay was an extrovert. He didn't mind standing out in a crowd. Most newspaper vendors adopt an anonymous face, quietly exchanging coins for the latest edition. Herb's a little like that, but not Jay.

Not that he was a glad-hander or a very talky guy. If all you wanted was a newspaper from Jay, that's all you got. But if you struck up a conversation he'd respond in kind. And if you got to know him, like I did over the course of a number of years, then he was warm and outgoing.

He liked to wear costumes. At Christmas he sometimes wore a sorta Santa's costume. One Halloween, when I dressed up as a bishop, Jay was an executioner. I had my crosier, Jay carried this huge and utterly authentic double-bladed ax. He joked about bishops in the Middle Ages losing their heads.

His droll humor could be time-delayed. I'd get up to my office before Jay's punch line would hit me. He told me a story one morning about an Englishman who asked him what was so special about the white parrot. "Cockatoo," was Jay's one-word answer. "Really?" the Englishman replied. "Two of them, how odd!" he said, walking off.

Jay first came to San Francisco in 1978. Born in Louisiana, he had served in the Korean War and lived in other West Coast cities, holding a variety of jobs. Jay first went to work as a Chronicle vendor sometime before 1981. Herb, who was originally from Terra Haute, Ind., met Jay in 1981, when he moved here. They got the first of several apartments together in the Tenderloin. Herb got a job as a vendor at the

Powell and Market newsstand in '87, but joined Jay at Seventh and Market the same year Art Penn, who worked the stand with Jay, died. By then, the newsstand or shack, as the vendors themselves called it, was situated on the southeast corner of Market. Jay moved there after the flower stand moved across Market, in front of the now-vacant Hibernia Bank.

For years, what made Jay and Herb's shack stand out were the flags. About 15 of them lined the top of the shack and flapped in the midafternoon Market Street breezes. Herb says Jay picked

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**Jay Broussard** first sold the Chronicle on Market Street more than 20 years ago.



PHOTO COURTESY OF HERB HART

## The day the fish floated to the top of the tank

BY ED BOWERS

ONE afternoon, as I was sipping ale while sitting in front of an aquarium in a roomy sports bar on O'Farrell, all the fish floated to the top of the tank. They'd given no warning and didn't appear to be ill, but all of them died in unison, floating to the top, as of one mind. One moment I was admiring their preciously colorful life forms, the next moment they were dead.

It was just like that, and no one could argue with it.

I called over the bartender, a cute, chubby little Irish woman with short auburn hair.

"Hey! Get over here!" I shouted. "Look at this! All the fish died!"

But she didn't hear me. She was on her cell phone, talking to someone important in her life.

I stared at the aquarium in awe — a miracle in reverse, as though caused by a demon rather than a saint. There must be a perfectly reasonable scientific explanation for this little tragedy, I thought.

But perhaps I was being naive. There's really no reasonable scientific explanation for life or death. Both are kind of crazy, perhaps holy, but nuts, never the less.

The bartender's phone call had concluded, and now she was busily engaged counting money. That was an important task so I didn't interrupt her. Money is life, and if it runs out, you're dead. I waited.

"Hey Myra! Come over here!" I called when she was finished counting. "All the fish just died!"

Myra came out from behind the bar, stared at the aquarium with an open mouth and big blue eyes, seemed puzzled for a second, then wailed like an Irish widow mourning her husband's demise from an I.R.A. attack. Whether he died from planting a bomb or being under one, the result was the same. Death is death on all levels, and so is despair.

"I knew we shouldn't have named them!" she cried.

That sounded bizarre. Still, I love the bizarre. It relieves my mind from the sadness imposed upon it.

"Named them?" I asked.

"Yeah, Eddy. We got attached to them, and gave each of the fish names. I see them all now. There's Bob and Mookie, Peter and Saks, and Roland and Woof."

"And they're dead because of that?" I asked.

"Too much love," she said. "We gave them too much love. Do you want another drink?"

It was over. Myra still had tears in her eyes but had moved on into the future. I was depressed and felt compelled to go back to my dirty room where I lived with ghosts from the past. It was a retreat instead of an advance, but sometimes in a war, retreat is the wisest decision.

I excused myself. "No thanks. I've had enough."

I walked out into the dusk, knowing I'd get no definitive

answers to this event except Myra's ambiguous, poetic statement. Too much love? What the hell did that mean? How could you give anyone too much love?

In my room, I hit up a half-pint of 100-proof vodka and felt neutralized. But I wasn't drunk. Having just been downsized for financial reasons from a brutal job I'd had for over a year, I was too jittery to get high. I laid down on my bed and tried to sleep.

I slept. Hours later,

at 8 p.m., the phone rang and I forced myself to answer it. It was one of my best friends in the Tenderloin, the only sector I exist in anymore, the area where all who are not wanted go to live and die.

My old friend Randolph, 58, had just managed to overcome prostate cancer and get his job back as a janitor after a conflict with his boss. On a sliding scale of 1 to 10, he was a winner in a losing world where the powerful laugh about the suffering of the weak, finding them stupid and boring.

"Hello Eddy," Randolph said. Being a music lover, I could hear right away in his voice that he was tired and beat, approaching despair, but afraid to venture out further than a moan.

"How yuh doin'?" I asked, happy to hear from him and always surprised to receive a phone call.

"I'm not too good," he said. "I just heard that Loca died."

Loca was only 41 years old, a beautiful African-American woman I'd met in a Tenderloin bar on a night when Randolph and I were drinking heavily. Both of us were attracted to her, but I'd given up attempting to gain salvation from others so I didn't pursue her.

Besides being a drug addict and alcoholic, Loca was a hard-working woman who'd labored at many honest jobs. At one point she washed buses at the Greyhound station, where she was bullied into doing more than her share of the work by employees who had been there longer. But working hard while not making a living wage is a dead-end and often leads the laborer to a cul-de-sac of drink, pills and hard drugs.

The first time I met Loca was in my favorite bar on the corner of Taylor and Turk. She was slightly drunk and desperately hustling for the man of her dreams. I saw it in her eyes, which had developed a Prozac stare in the direction of any man that moved.

But by the time a woman arrives at this bar she should know it's over for romance. This is the entrance to the Other Side of the Camp, The Last Chance Saloon where you're allowed to sit and heal or die before going on, either into Life, or monogamously alone into The Land of the Dead.

Believe it or not, this bar is a corporation and does its job fairer than most. Many bartenders here have experienced death and aren't afraid of it anymore. Whether they come back from it or not is all the same to them. They're not particularly worried about being fired or downsized. They're already dead. So they're free to make a living at being themselves, as most of us are not.

Loca had the smooth, big-eyed face of a model, sorrowful eyes they were, and a gorgeous centerfold body with liver spots camouflaged by her black skin. She became my best friend's lover, so I'm writing this for him and

her and others like them who I pray will survive, either in the visible or invisible world, forever. I'm writing this to ease her journey into the Land of the Dead, to give her the ammunition to survive past rational thought.

I can't remember what Loca and I talked about the first time I met her. She was still looking for the perfect mate. I had given up my romantic quest, preferring to

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PHOTOS BY CARL ANGEL

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the flags for their designs, not the country or anything symbolic: Kenya, Canada, Japan and Germany, as well as flags from countries nobody had ever heard of, including Jay. "I don't know," was a fairly common reply when people asked about any particular flag. The flags made the shack look like a little U.N., much to Jay's consternation. "Just because I fly a bunch of flags, why would people think I'd want to sell papers from Germany?" he would grouse. Jay was not first and foremost a businessman.

Eventually, things began to change in Herb and Jay's world. The homeless population was growing, and many of them were doing their business in the street because there were few public rest rooms. Newly elected Mayor Willie Brown flew off to the pissor capital, Paris, for a week and was wined and dined by the JCDecaux Co., makers of fine public restrooms and equally imposing advertising kiosks. In between mouthfuls of quiche, the mayor agreed to a contract with JCDecaux, which would install public restrooms and clean them in return for erecting a number of advertising kiosks on Market Street. Some of the kiosks would be designed to accommodate the sale of newspapers, thus eliminating the "unsightly" wooden newspaper shacks.

The new kiosk was a fourth the size of the old shack, with room enough for one vendor, exposed to the elements and forced to squat rather than sit comfortably inside. There was no space for a portable heater that had kept the two newsies warm in winter.

Jay and Herb were less than thrilled with their new circumstances. For Jay the kiosk's final indignity came the morning a woman walked up to him and, thinking he was sitting in a pissor, asked if he was going to be much longer. The image of Jay sitting there looking up at this woman is something I will take to my grave.

About 18 months ago, Jay had his first heart attack. He was gone for several weeks; when he returned, he was ashen-faced and clearly weak. Wilbert Dow, the Grant Building security guard, got a chair for Jay to sit in while he and Herb took turns in the kiosk.

Dow recalled Jay: "He was real nice. If you needed something he would just give it to you." Jay, born and raised in Crawley, La., would bring in food and share it. "He use to cook this great Cajun food: red beans and rice, pork chops, gumbo. Stuff was great."

Not everybody benefited. Jay wasn't some saint. As Dow said, "If he liked you, he liked you. And if he didn't, well ... he didn't and that was that."

As time went on we saw less and less of Herb and Jay. New vendors inhabited the kiosk. Herb spent much of his time attending to Jay, who was in a wheelchair during his infrequent visits back to his old haunts. The parrots were a casualty. "At the end there, I was lucky if I were [at the kiosk] two hours a day. There just was no time to bring the birds," Herb said.

The end came on a Sunday. Herb took a phone call from San Francisco General around 11:30 a.m. telling him that Jay was fading fast. When he got to the hospital at 1 p.m., Jay had already passed.

A service was held on April 2 for the people in the Grant Building who knew Jay.

One of those people, Roy Crew, director of the Office of Self Help, spoke of Jay's passing with deep regret.

"He was an authentic person, someone who stood out and made a difference in the lives of the people who knew him," Crew said. "You can't replace people like that. It's like what happened to the news shack. That was an authentic part of San Francisco's past and now they're just getting rid of all of them. No one's going to come and take Jay Broussard's place. I'm just sorry that he's gone."

Asked if he will bring the birds back, now that he's returned to the kiosk, Herb simply replied, "Maybe." ■

PHOTO COURTESY OF HERB HART



**Jay often prepared Cajun food for his friends in the nearby Grant Building.**

**Herb Hart, in the kiosk, isn't sure if he'll bring the birds back.**

PHOTO BY CARL ANGEL



## Neighborhood comings and goings

The central city has the population of a good-size town; 24,000 people live in the Tenderloin alone. And our mortality rate is higher than many other neighborhoods.

The Extra intends to publish notices of the deaths — and births — of central city residents and longtime neighborhood workers

on a regular basis. We are interested in recollections, anecdotes and tributes.

Please send your comments to Central City Extra, 1095 Market St., S.F. 94102. And let us know how to contact you if necessary. We can't guarantee we will use all the information submitted, but will do our best.