

ROBERT BURKE
Wrote for "Hollywood Squares"

For 10 years, Robert Burke and Beth Chiarelli met regularly for lunches that were punctuated with the 5-foot-2 Burke's stream of witticisms and banter. The 5-year-old son of a friend of his some years ago had once looked up and asked his mom, "Is Bobby a grown-up or a kid?"

"It was our standing joke," said Chiarelli, his social worker 10 years ago when Mr. Burke was in the city's shelter system, just before he moved into the Ritz Hotel, an SRO on Eddy Street. "He was quite a guy, positive about everything. He used to write for 'Hollywood Squares.'"

"He was more like a kid than anyone I ever knew," said Morgan Paris. "He was the liveliest person in the Ritz. I called him the Watermelon Kid because he loved watermelon. Every day I miss him. It's not the same without him."

Paris and Chiarelli were two of a half-dozen friends who attended Mr. Burke's memorial at the Ritz on Sept. 19. Mr. Burke, who claimed he never had gone to a hospital, was taken unconscious from his fourth floor room on Sept. 6 after fracturing his neck in a bathtub fall, his friends said. He died of complications two days later at St. Francis Hospital. He was 68.

Chiarelli, who had her 2-year-old son Devin with her, said Mr. Burke did office work in his life but also once wrote for "Hollywood Squares" and was a friend of actor Paul Lynde, a show regular.

Paris said Mr. Burke had injured his back in another fall in February. He was incapacitated and his friends ran errands for him. In two weeks he resumed watching sports on television downstairs, insisting that others watch, too. Originally from Boston, he avidly followed the Red Sox and was a consummate tennis fan, rising well before dawn to watch every hour of the French Open in May. It was suspicious when he missed a couple of days of the U.S. Open in September.

"I called to tell him about the Andre Agassi match, but there was no answer," Paris said. "I had the hotel go up and check and they found him."

Dozens of inscriptions on two sheets of paper next to flowers and two lighted candles on a memorial table recalled his scintillating personality and love of sports. "God has blessed you, you have a better seat now for all the major tennis matches," said one. "I think the Red Sox will win again this year and (Roger) Federer won the Open," said another.

Mr. Burke attended every social event the Ritz sponsored, said Ritz Hotel social worker William Leary. "His name was always at the top of the signup list," he said. "And he was the official food taster. He had to taste everything first to see if it was okay for everyone. He knew how to make people smile."

Someone said a fortune-teller once told Mr. Burke he'd live to 101 but he said he didn't need all that time. He had done everything he wanted to do, he said, and was happy with who he was.

—TOM CARTER

IDA GARNER
Safeway worker

Ida Garner worked many jobs in her life and was looking for another when she died unexpectedly of unknown causes in her Senator Hotel room on Labor Day, hotel sources said. She was 52.

"She looked like the picture of health when she came here," said Deborah Brooks, the hotel intake coordinator.

But Ms. Garner had "health issues" she was trying to resolve as she also sought employment, said Dorothy Ridley, supervisor of Tenant Services, before a memorial for Ms. Garner on Sept. 11.

Her friends said Ms. Garner was a slight, sweet, soft-spoken lady who favored wearing "leopard" — animal print — pants. She loved cooking soul food, especially ham hocks and yams, in the hotel's community kitchen.

Ms. Garner had worked for Safeway, in concessions at SBC Park, recycling for the Gay Pride parade and at odd jobs that the Tenderloin Housing Clinic found for her, Ridley said. She was homeless before signing up for the city's shelter system that led a year ago to permanent housing at the Senator.

"She was like a big sister to me," said a lady who identified herself as Kim. "She had a smile that would knock you off your feet. You don't get the good people too often. This is the worst thing that could happen. And this is how I have to close it out."

Ms. Garner is survived by two daughters, one in Los Angeles, the other in Michigan.

—TOM CARTER

LEE HARMONY
Carpenter, waiter

Lee Harmony sat in his wheelchair in the Alexander Residence lobby, or went to UCSF for cancer treatments. The rest of the time he was in his room watching cowboy movies where his caregiver visited six days a week and prepared his meals.

"If he (Mr. Harmony) came to any social event he didn't stay," said his social worker Winnie Kwong. "He'd take his food upstairs to his room. When he came back from the hospital the last time I asked him why he didn't go to a hospice or a nursing home? He said, 'What are you talking about? I want to die here, at home.'"

Mr. Harmony got his wish on Sept. 19, succumbing in his 11th floor room. He was 66.

"I'd see him in the lobby," Beatrice Duran, a woman who has lived at the Alexander a year, said at his memorial service. "He was a quiet man but he always responded if you greeted him. And he is a member of this big family. I feel the loss. I pray for his eternal peace."

As the Rev. Glenda Hope read scriptures and prayed, Kwong interpreted for the dozen Chinese and Filipino women and men who attended the memorial. More than half of the Alexander's 200 residents are elderly Asians.

Mr. Harmony had once been married in Michigan and has a brother and sister in Idaho, his friends said. He worked as a carpenter and handyman, also as a waiter in New York and at a Powell Street restaurant, Edgar Sanchez, his caregiver of 18 months, said.

Kwong said Mr. Harmony wanted to leave her everything in his will but she said no, a social worker can't do that. She did accept his movies, about 100, including the TV series, "Gunsmoke," all of which she donated to the hotel's library. The remainder of his estate he left to Sanchez, she said.



—TOM CARTER

STEVEN PANGLE
Vietnam veteran

Steve Pangle could scare you to death just by looking at him. He had a full beard, long hair and no teeth. In his black leather jacket, the 6-foot-1, 200-pounder looked like a glowering Hells Angel. He was gruff and irascible besides.

But it didn't keep a handful of his friends-at-a-distance at the Iroquois Hotel from liking the loner, or his understanding sister from her unconditional love.

Mr. Pangle, a Marine who served in Vietnam in the early 1970s, died in his Iroquois room on Oct. 5, two weeks after returning from a seven-month hospital stay. He had lived in the O'Farrell Street SRO six years. He was 55.

At his Oct. 10 memorial several residents told how they had appreciated Mr. Pangle.

"He was a character who had his ups and downs, and some attitude," said one man. "But he always said hi to me." A big lady described how much Mr. Pangle admired her arm tattoos, which became their casual friendship bond. And she said she was glad when he came home from the hospital.

"Oh, he was so handsome and kind," said another woman, fighting back tears. She glanced at Mr. Pangle's sister sitting in the front row and added, "I had a crush on him, by the way." Everyone laughed.

"He was rough around the edges," said Cory Reese from his wheelchair. "I think we related through disability. He could be a big tough guy but he told me once how hard it was for him to parachute out of a plane the first time. He wet his pants."

But it was Mr. Pangle's sister, Pamela Hageman, who provided a history. She and her husband and one of their two sons had come up from Monterey. On a bulletin board leaning against a table with two candles were 15 pictures she had put up. One was of Mr. Pangle as a sweet little boy in a striped, dark T-shirt, another was of him as a handsome, strapping high school student in coat and tie. A black-and-white snapshot showed the two as children sitting on a step, and in a leap to 2002, a color photo showed the burly, leather-jacketed brother with his arm around his pretty blonde sister.

Hageman said her brother died of a drug overdose after resuming his habit following his long hospital stay, but the medical examiner's office couldn't confirm that and on Oct. 27 said the cause was still pending.

She and her brother had been raised in China Lake near the Mojave Desert where they rode bikes and hunted lizards, and he was big-brother-protector.

"Nobody messed with me in high school," she said. "He could be scary. But unfortunately he didn't get the love and attention at home he needed, and at 13 or 14 he turned to drugs."

She lost track of him after high school. She later learned he had been in the Marines, worked for the Post Office, was married twice and has an estranged son, 24. A father-in-law of his once said he was "a great guy when he was clean and holding a job," she said. "But drugs were a demon he was never able to conquer."

She reconnected with her brother 17 years ago when he was diagnosed schizophrenic, went on SSI and needed a sponsor to receive his monthly checks. In his impatience for money, he'd call her at home and leave messages laced with foul language.

"I was a wife, a mother with two children and working two jobs," she said, "and I didn't need that. So I told him to forget it. But he apologized and said he loved me. I was the one solid thing he could count on."

When she had to call him, and he answered gruffly, she cut him down with sweetness.

"I'd say, 'hello, Sunshine,' " she said, "and he'd immediately change and be nice. 'Hi, Sis,' he'd say."

They met infrequently over the years as he bounced around before landing in San Francisco. But when he got sick in February they started talking a lot more. And two days after he returned from the hospital, she came to visit. She learned he had given the nurses such a bad time that he was passed from one hospital to another to get rid of him.

Hageman brought her brother clothes, food, a microwave and two tickets to a Nov. 2 concert starring his favorite group, Arrowsmith, at Shoreline Amphitheater in Mountain View.

Mr. Pangle was ambulatory but in pain. His colon and three-fourths of his stomach had been removed. She stayed seven hours. His room had knives and swords on the walls. They talked a lot and said they loved each other.

"My brother liked pizza, Arrowsmith, the Raiders, motorcycles, the Roman Empire, lemon meringue pie, Butterfingers and weapons," she said standing next to the pictures. "Some people asked if he overdosed on purpose. I don't think so. He was looking forward to getting rid of the colostomy bag and the concert, and I was going to come back for a visit."

"But he had been in the hospital so long and then he must have resumed the same level of drugs. His body couldn't take it."

"Some say people like him weren't meant to be here. But I thought he was here for me. He was ornery and reclusive and a very big bad guy — but he really wasn't. I'll miss him."

She said she would donate his body to a college here because "I'm sure they can learn something," and thanked people for coming.

Then the group broke up and ate the pizza that Hageman offered and listened to an Arrowsmith CD she brought.

—TOM CARTER

MORLIN SMITH
Longtime resident

Morlin Smith, longtime Tenderloin resident, died Oct. 3 at the age of 59.

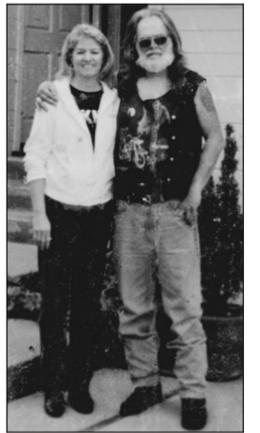
Cards on the table at his memorial service at the Alexander Residence showed Mr. Smith was held in high regard by staff and residents.

One staff member wrote, "Thank you for always being kind and patient with the new girl at the desk."

"And thank you for making your space safe for people in need of sanctuary. Your helping nature and accessibility will live on in the hearts of those you touched," another noted. When asked what "sanctuary" referred to, a staff member laughed and shook his head before answering, "When he could bring people in, on the sly, to crash there, he would."

Mr. Smith was born and raised in Marin County. His family did not attend the memorial because the funeral was being held at the same time. They sent flowers as a way to celebrate his life with those he spent his days with, the ones who consistently called him "a good person."

—HAPPY HYDER



Pamela Hageman and Steven Pangle