

LINDA CHIKERE

Tenant activist — 'Very sweet, very feisty'

A bright light burned out at the San Cristina Hotel when Linda "SuSu" Chikere died in her room of complications from AIDS on Feb. 18.

Ms. Chikere, known for her tenant organizing since 1992 and her driving personality, had recently returned from the hospital, rejecting doctors' advice to stay under care. She wanted to go "home," she said. When her condition worsened, her friends said, she refused an ambulance ride back to the hospital. She was 49.

Ms. Chikere helped organize the hotel's first tenant board in 1993, soon after the hotel reopened after renovation. Alternately cantankerous and loving, she became the first board president, served nine years and inspired a host of tenants to join the board and speak up for their rights.

More than 50 of her friends celebrated her life on Feb. 27. They packed a small room off the hotel lobby. A dozen stood along the walls.

"I look at this gathering and know this was quite a woman with a legacy of love of life and drawing people into the larger community," said the Rev. Glenda Hope, who led the service.

Marcelee Watkins and Earl Gadsen sang solos a cappella and their voices filled the room. Clapping and humming, the crowd got down with Gadsen's rendition of "Take My Hand Precious Lord."

"In honor of people who give help, we honor SuSu," Gadsen said. The nickname, her sister Lucille Daymon said, she gave herself.

Ms. Chikere was well-known for being tough and "cussing people out," yet she won people's hearts. She was a "beautiful, strong woman" who wisely advised people.

"Very sweet, very feisty," said former San



Cristina manager Brian Quinn.

"She got me out of my shell," said a man who met her 10 years ago. "She said get out and talk to people. I became a photographer. She's up there now wanting a bigger house — and saying she deserves it."

"She was unofficially known as 'the warden,'" another man said.

A man told about making French fries in the community kitchen when he first moved in, but somebody ruined the batch and he was so furious he wanted to lash out. He said Ms. Chikere told him, "Don't worry about it, baby, your housing is more important."

The 5-foot-4 woman had battled AIDS for years and weighed 75 pounds when she died, said Laurie Rudner, her friend of a dozen years.

Ms. Chikere's spirit filled the room, her friends said repeatedly. They said they needed to remember that the gathering was an inspiration to come together more frequently as a supportive family.

Tenant board President Benjamin Wynn said the board wanted to name the hotel lobby's garden with its tropical wall mural painted by residents and fountain "SuSu Garden."

"She came back," said Rudner, "and we were lucky enough to say goodbye."

—TOM CARTER

LEE JENKINS

Gospel singer

San Francisco-born Lee "Pop" Jenkins, a gospel singer and former amateur boxer, was remembered as a kind man who was easy to talk to, with friends eager to help him as his health deteriorated.

Mr. Jenkins died at St. Francis Hospital from respiratory complications on Jan. 26, two weeks before his first grandchild was born, an event he longed to live for, his friends said at his Feb. 12 memorial in the Dalt Hotel. He was 58.

Mr. Jenkins was HIV-positive. But asthma and emphysema had him in and out of the hospital for the two years he lived at the Dalt, Monique Flambures, the hotel social worker, said. In recent months he was in a wheelchair.

A family service was held earlier in the month.

"My husband was a friend of his and asked me to take care of him," said Irma Crandle. "So I did for many months, like he was my own. We all called him Pop." Mr. Jenkins was in Room 448 and the Crandles in Room 445. "I was raised up to try to help people. I was glad I could do that. It helped me out of my own depression (over having diabetes)."

Crandle said Mr. Jenkins told her she looks strikingly like his mother. Crandle got him walking a little for his health, but his legs were badly ulcerated. She finally recommended that he go back to the hospital.



"He was very depressed over the holidays," she said. "And he was afraid if he went he wouldn't come back."

He didn't.

Jenkins' brother, James, who lives in the hotel, didn't attend the memorial but said afterward that Mr. Jenkins liked singing and had boxed in Golden Gloves competition. But he wouldn't elaborate.

"Oh, we used to sing together," said Crandle, who had gone upstairs to get her photo of him. "In our rooms, in the car, on the sidewalk. I hadn't done that since my choir days. He made me get up and go."

Mr. Jenkins leaves his mother, his brother James, a second brother, children who live across town, and a grandchild.

In bestowing Mr. Jenkins' "final dignity," the Rev. Glenda Hope remembered that the first TL memorial she conducted more than 25 years ago was at the Dalt. Then, it was a dirty fleabag occupied mostly by old winos, she said. A woman had recently jumped out a fifth-story window.

But a major TNDC rehabilitation through the Mayor's Office of Housing completed two years ago, and counseling services, have made the hotel clean, pleasant and caring.

"I'm grateful for the changes," the Rev. Hope said, "and for the people who have made it a place of safety and refreshment."

—TOM CARTER

FRANK COLE

SRO tenant advocate

Frank Cole was one of those people who really cared about his fellow tenants at the Vincent Hotel and wanted everything to be fair and just, said Luis Barahona, a Central City SRO Collaborative staff member.

For three years, Mr. Cole was the Vincent's tenant representative and met regularly at the Collaborative offices with other Tenderloin, SoMa and north Mission District hotel reps. He lived at the Vincent for six years before his death Dec. 22 from pneumonia. He was 53.

"This was unexpected and he'll be sorely missed," Barahona said. "Frank was an advocate. He was always willing to volunteer to go out and speak about tenant concerns."

Twelve people attended a Jan. 3 memorial for Mr. Cole in the small front meeting room of the hotel. None knew much about his past, but all praised his goodness.

"I've lived here for 2½ years, and we became friends," said one. "He had a computer and he taught me about computers. He was a good friend and a good man."

Dwight Saunders, another SRO Collaborative staff member, recalled Mr. Cole's intensity. "He had a lot of passion. He was a good dude — an Ohio State fan — and we talked sports all the time. Especially in the last few months, he was intense about what he believed in. I loved his integrity."

Rodney Hauge, who's lived at the Vincent for two years and was a candidate for the Democratic Central Committee in the last election, said that Mr. Cole was the first to sign his petition for the post.

"I really appreciated that," Hauge said. "Frank's activities weren't just related to the Vincent or the neighborhood. They expanded beyond the Tenderloin, and we're all going to miss him."

Mr. Cole is survived by a sister and brother who live in the Bay Area.

—MARJORIE BEGGSS

KAREN GAMBLE

Fought AIDS

Karen Gamble's friends said she was ornery and stubborn but they liked her and admired her toughness as she battled AIDS and drug addiction.

Five of the half-dozen mourners at her memorial on Jan. 23 at the Ambassador Hotel didn't know the cause of Ms. Gamble's death. Rumors flew that the 5-foot, 95-pound woman had been beaten or

had overdosed. They hadn't seen her for weeks.

"People say a lot of things," said her friend, Minyon Harlin, who had been with her in a Walden House recovery program.

Ms. Gamble was taken by ambulance from the Ambassador to St. Francis Hospital and later to S.F. General where she died of AIDS at age 57 on Jan. 1, Red Logan, a St. Mary's Hospital peer counselor and Shanti advocate, told the gathering. She had lived at the Ambassador since June 2003.

Logan said that when he accompanied Ms. Gamble to doctors' appointments and grocery shopping the "sweetheart" side of her would come out.

"I'd offer to buy her a hamburger at Jack-in-the-Box and she would order the biggest one and with fries, knowing she couldn't eat it all," he said. "She'd give the rest away."

"But she told me she didn't like what she was doing (in life) and felt trapped. She didn't want people to see her vulnerability but she loved being with people and hearing their problems because she'd get to the bottom of them and try to make it right."

One woman who said she had met Ms. Gamble at A Woman's Place shelter tearfully remembered that she was "ornery" but "held on to life" like no one she had known.

Harlin said before she went away Ms. Gamble was afraid that when she went to sleep she wouldn't wake up. She asked Harlin, who lives on the third floor, to stay in her second floor room with her, which Harlin did on several occasions.

"There was a stubborn side to her," Harlin said. "And talking to her was like talking to this bookshelf. But she could be a sweet, sweet person. I'm glad she doesn't have to suffer anymore. And yes, I'll miss her."

Ms. Gamble leaves a stepdaughter who works at World Savings in Oakland and a son who lives in Northern California.

—TOM CARTER

BOBBY PALMER

A crowd pleaser

More than 20 hotel residents and staff paid their final respects to the most charismatic character living in the Iroquois Hotel for the last 10 years, the bubbly Bobby Palmer, a flashy dresser, hard worker and all-around good guy.

"This is more people than we usually see at a memorial," said the Rev. Glenda Hope at the Jan. 10 memorial for Mr. Palmer in the mezzanine's community room. "And it speaks to who Bobby was."

Mr. Palmer died Dec. 20, apparently of complications from emphysema. He was discovered by staff during a room check the next day. He was 51. He leaves an ex-wife and teenage daughter in Pacifica and his mother, who lives in San Francisco.

The staff said Mr. Palmer had been hospitalized for five months in the last year, first at St. Francis then, following a relapse, at Davies Medical Center. After returning home, he kept an oxygen tank in his room.

"He was one of the first residents I met when I started here five years ago," said Jeff Kositsky, executive director of Community Housing Partnership, which owns the building. "He was really a nice person and kept everything so positive. He was an inspiration to me."

Kositsky said he was also proud that Mr. Palmer went through the Housing Partnership employment-training program two years ago and worked at other of its properties as a janitor.

Tenant Services Director Gail Gilman said Mr. Palmer was among the first she interviewed for occupancy in the renovated Iroquois.

"He wanted to know if any foxy women would be here," Gilman said. "It was important to him — and I assured him there would be. And when he graduated from the maintenance work training program, that was a shining moment for him."

His friends lavished praise on Mr. Palmer. They recalled his constant smile and loud, infectious sense of humor. They said he had an array of snappy hats and matching outfits. Typical of his generosity, he gave rides anywhere to friends in his red Camaro that was still parked in back of the hotel. He was also driven by a strict work ethic. He kept a complete tool kit and could fix and build just about anything, they said. His success formula in a word was, "focus."

"When we had barbecues on the roof, he was up at 5 in the morning getting the grill started," said Patricia Harris. "He was a great cook."

Harris attended Emerson Elementary School in the Western Addition with Mr. Palmer and his brother, Jimmy, in the third grade. The school has since

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