

MacDonald's celebrates its 75th

Phil Tracy

A diamond in the rough

The MacDonald's bookstore, at 48 Turk St., sits on one of our sleaziest blocks.

MacDonald's side of the street boasts The 21 Club, Wild J's XXX video parlor, the Gaiety XXX movie house, two welfare hotels and Tenderloin Liquor, which seems to specialize in selling cigarettes to women in hot pants. Hot pants! I hadn't seen a pair of hot pants in 15 years, but they're wearing them just four doors down from MacDonald's. The block ends nicely enough, though, with the new upscale Metropole Hotel and pricey restaurant anchoring the Market end of Turk, in sharp contrast to MacDonald's end.

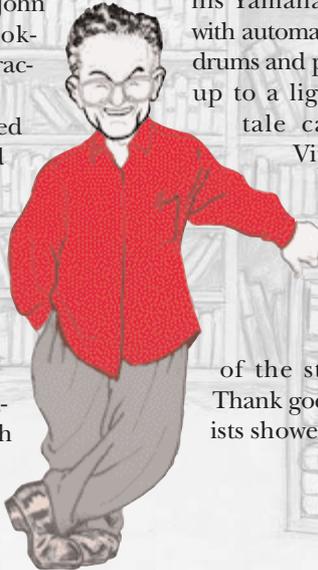
Given its unpretentious location, it is all the more remarkable that the bookstore was celebrating its 75th Anniversary with a party.

Well, perhaps party is stretching it a bit. A gathering was more like it. Still, a 75th Anniversary is an accomplishment for any institution and given the brooding prognostications for the used book business, the MacDonald's bookstore saga might be viewed as positively heroic. When I asked Itzhak Volansky, the store's manager for the last 20 years, how it was MacDonald's had survived in the Tenderloin while dozens of other used bookstores throughout the city had closed in the last 15 years, he replied succinctly.

"It helps to have a second income," he drolly explained. "It helps to have a wife that works. And, most importantly, it helps if you live frugally, as in I'm having a bowl of steam for dinner." His face assumed a rueful cast with that last remark. For the record, Mr. Volansky, at age 51, has very little fat on him.

Actually, the reason MacDonald's has survived, when most used bookstores have shuttered their doors is because of two men. Mr. Volansky, who practices frugality and John MacDonald, the bookstore founder, who practiced socialism.

MacDonald opened the place in 1926 and kept it running for the next 40 years. A newspaper clipping with his photo is pasted on the side of one of the store's bookshelves. It shows a tall, angular man with thinning hair. His mouth



Itzhak Volansky in the bookstore.

is open, as befits a socialist. Although he printed and distributed socialist tracts, the bookstore carried general interest titles. Throughout the 1930s and '40s it was prosperous. Although never a rich neighborhood, the Tenderloin was tonier than it is now and reading habits were far more robust among the working classes. When the market turned soft, MacDonald stuck it out. Word has it he was a stubborn guy, also befitting a socialist.

He sold the place in 1965 and Volansky's family took it over two years later. It's open six days a week, 10:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. It is closed Sundays.

When I asked Itzhak Volansky if the store had changed much over the years, he claimed it had, pointing out that the music inventory had shifted from vinyl records, to LPs, to 8-track audiotapes to CDs. And its visual offerings from 16mm to videotapes and now DVDs. But I don't think you're going to find many DVDs at MacDonald's and the records I saw all went back to the '70s or '60s. The place has a timeless feel and while the titles may change, the store still and always has had a big fiction section and the dozens of specialty groupings — sailing, medicine, architecture — have stayed the same since MacDonald's time. Okay, so they've got a computer section today, but the software manuals I saw were all for programs no one is using anymore.

As for the gathering, it was modest. The store had set up an open mike and Coy McAllister, who's in the security business and has been writing poetry for about a year, read a couple of his poems, using a Coltrane CD as musical backup.

Jay Latkoczky, who is pursuing a master's degree in a leisurely manner — he's in his 30's — read a poem he wrote when he was 12 titled "And that was that." Volansky himself set up his Yamaha keyboard with automatic bass and drums and played backup to a light-hearted tale called "the Viper."

It was all very low-keyed, in keeping with the ambiance of the store itself. Thank god, no socialists showed up. ■

Now 20 years old, TNDC spells home for 3,000 low-income tenants

PHOTO: CARL ANGEL

Nice round numbers — 20 buildings in 20 years. That's how many properties the Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corp. has bought, renovated and turned into much needed, safe, affordable housing since it was founded with the assistance of the California Franciscan Friars in 1981. May 22, about 700 community, civic and government leaders helped TNDC celebrate its birthday with a bash at the Hilton San Francisco.

A lot of nice things were said about TNDC, says Executive Director Brother Kelly Cullen, but several stood out.

"A long-time San Franciscan said that our biggest accomplishment was 'healing the city,'" Cullen recalls, "and a TNDC building manager got a standing ovation after she described how her affiliation with us changed her life. It was very moving — it brought tears to my eyes."

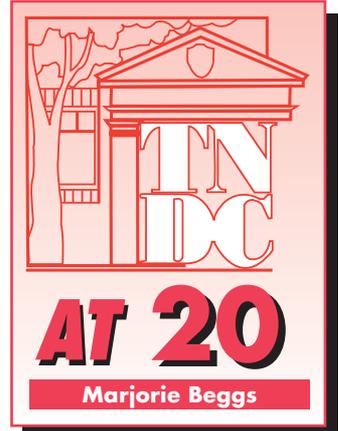
More than 3,000 low-income residents live in TNDC's 1,600 units. Of the 20 buildings, a majority of them residential hotels, 17 are in the Tenderloin, one is South of Market, two are in the Lower Haight.

TNDC, which is nonsectarian despite its Franciscan roots, does more than provide about 10% of all of the TL's residential housing. Its tenants can apply for emergency homeless prevention assistance; consult with TNDC social workers; get job counseling, training and placement; and enroll their children in a free after-school program that offers tutoring, art and computer classes and more.

Cullen's connection to TNDC goes back to its first year. "I was TNDC's second tenant in its first building, the Aarti Hotel," he says. "At that time, TNDC was fighting to enact rezoning and down-zoning in the Tenderloin, and we

were very involved tenants." Cullen was asked to sit on the TNDC board in 1988, and was named director in 1992.

"I see us as a business with a mission — responding to the affordable housing needs of extremely low-income San Franciscans," says Cullen. "We want to make the Tenderloin better for everyone who lives in and around here, but we also know that the city needs family housing." To fill that need, to find those larger units, TNDC has acquired the Howard Street Apartments, South of Market.



By 2005, TNDC expects to add another 1,000 units that will house an additional 2,500 people. Two of the proposed properties are South of Market, at 8th and Howard and 10th and Market.

TNDC's growth — it started with three buildings that housed 250 people — is reflected in its \$11.4 million budget. More than half its expenses go to housing management (\$3.2 million), building maintenance (\$1.8 million) and utilities (\$1.2 million). Rent accounts for 68%, or \$8.1 million, of income, with the rest coming from individual and corporate donations, foundation grants, fees and government support.

Cullen says that the only real frustration he's experienced in his years with TNDC



Brother Kelly Cullen speechifies at the birthday bash.

is the constant battle to come up with sufficient financial resources to provide more housing: "That and the fact that some people think big isn't to be trusted," that just because the organization has grown, its mission has somehow shifted.

"But we're still part of the neighborhood," Cullen says. "My continuing greatest thrill in this work is not really knowing but sensing the impact we've had on people lives — in our buildings and in the neighborhood and with our incredible staff. We're making a difference." ■

TNDC's 20

The 20 hotels and apartment buildings that TNDC owns:

- Aarti Hotel, 391 Leavenworth
- Alexander Residence, 230 Eddy
- Ambassador Hotel, 55 Mason
- Antonia Manor, 180 Turk
- Cameo Apartments, 481 Eddy
- Civic Center Residence, 44 McAllister
- Dalt Hotel, 34 Turk
- Ellis Apartments, 864 Ellis
- Franciscan Towers, 217 Eddy
- Haight Street Apartments, 398 Haight
- Howard Street Apartments, 1601-17 Howard
- Klimm Apartments, 460 Ellis
- Maria Manor, 174 Ellis
- Pierce Apartments, 220 Pierce
- Plaza Apartments, 250 McAllister
- Ramona Apartments, 260 McAllister
- Ritz Hotel, 216 Eddy
- Sierra Madre Apartments, 421 Leavenworth
- West Hotel, 140 Eddy
- Yosemite Apartments, 480 Eddy

PHOTO: CARL ANGEL



As TNDC entered its third decade, 700 of its closest friends dined at the Hilton in celebration.