

Hank Wilson – Teresa of the Tenderloin

He eased pain of AIDS — from the Ambassador Hotel to Tenderloin Health

BY TOM CARTER

THERE'S a job that can't wait, Hank Wilson told the volunteer intern from SF Network Ministries. Upstairs, in the Ambassador Hotel that Wilson managed, George was in bad shape, very sick, incontinent. They had to give him a bath.

They went upstairs. George had gotten out of his filthy room and was crawling down the hallway naked, covered in his excrement.

The two got him into the bathroom. Wilson drew the bath and with effort pulled George into the tub and started cleaning the tenant who had always given him a hard time, the Rev. Glenda Hope recalled, as she told the story in her Network Ministries office recently. It was more than 20 years ago, and it was her intern.

"That's who Hank was at the core," she said, sniffing and dabbing her eyes. "That's what we saw in him. This guy who had so ripped him off — and was screaming obscenities and cursing him — and Hank was tenderly washing the shit out of his hair like a mother with a baby, and then drying him off with fluffy towels. And meanwhile, someone was changing his sheets."

The Rev. Hope paused as the memories from 28 years of knowing Mr. Wilson and often working with him in the Tenderloin's deepest trenches flooded her mind. As the guiding light of Network Ministries, the diminutive, rail-thin pastor has ministered to the poor and dispossessed and developed programs since 1972. She was not an intimate friend of the gay man, but a very

would have banned gay teachers in public schools. Mr. Wilson started the Gay Teachers Association and, with Ammiano, created a Gay Speakers bureau to educate public school students grades 7 through 12 about gay and lesbian issues. It was just the beginning.

"The number of organizations that Hank was involved in founding that are now the pillar organizations of the gay and lesbian community both in San Francisco and nationally is staggering," his close friend, UC Davis Professor Bob Ostertag, wrote on the Huffington Post Website.

Some names have changed, but others are: Bay Area Gay Liberation, Lavender Youth Recreation and Information Center (LYRIC), Butterfly Brigade, ACT UP San Francisco, Survive AIDS, AIDS Candlelight Vigil, San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Film Festival and Tenderloin AIDS Resource Center. He also served on the San Francisco Human Rights Commission's Youth and Education Committee.

A NEIGHBORHOOD HERO

But his unique work in the Tenderloin, first with the poor and homeless, and then with the poor who were dying of AIDS, made him a neighborhood hero. On Dec. 1, AIDS Day, a memorial for him was held at Tenderloin Health, the nonprofit he co-founded that originally addressed the AIDS scourge and now serves 350 homeless people a day.

Following brief remarks, the crowd picked up whistles as prearranged, blowing them along a half-block march down Golden Gate Avenue to St. Anthony's Foundation to a larger community room. The crowd grew to 75. (As co-founder of Coalition United Against Violence, Mr. Wilson helped start a Blow the Whistle Against Violence campaign.)

More than a half dozen speakers, including Hope, told how Mr. Wilson's work with suffering people had profoundly impressed them and in some cases helped change lives.

"His memory won't end here," said Blackberri, a large black man who sang a song he composed 30 years ago when Harvey Milk was assassinated. "He (Mr. Wilson) taught San Francisco how to stand tall."

On Dec. 6, the AIDS organizations he started and others held a "Thanks to Hank" commemoration in the Eureka Valley Recreation Center gym, sponsored by the GLBT Historical Society and attended by 350. It culminated in a spirited march led by Extra-Action Marching Band through the Castro as more celebrants spilled out of bars, restaurants and shops to join the throng.

Mr. Wilson, handsome, bespectacled, with a mustache, lived a Spartan life jammed with work. He often astonished friends with innovative ideas he acted on quickly, as they scrambled to support him. His personality suited him well. Through 35 years of the endless challenges he sought as an activist, he maintained a droll, sometimes dark, sense of humor. He disarmingly spoke the straightforward truth and was relentlessly critical of wrong-headed policies. He never asked anybody to do anything he wouldn't do himself, including getting arrested and going off to jail. He became an inspiration to all around him, and a mentor to hundreds of them.

Mr. Wilson lived in a small room in a Market Street apartment building and slept on an air mattress on the floor. When the daily sea of troubles got to him, he recharged by swimming laps at the YMCA.

His friends say he had no interest in politics, although he ran for District 6 supervisor in 2000, finishing seventh in a field of 18 with 508 votes. He was indifferent to making money, too. Instead, the irresistible flame that drew him was people who needed help the most.

Mr. Wilson's focus after he left teaching fell on the Tenderloin in 1977. He and friend Ron

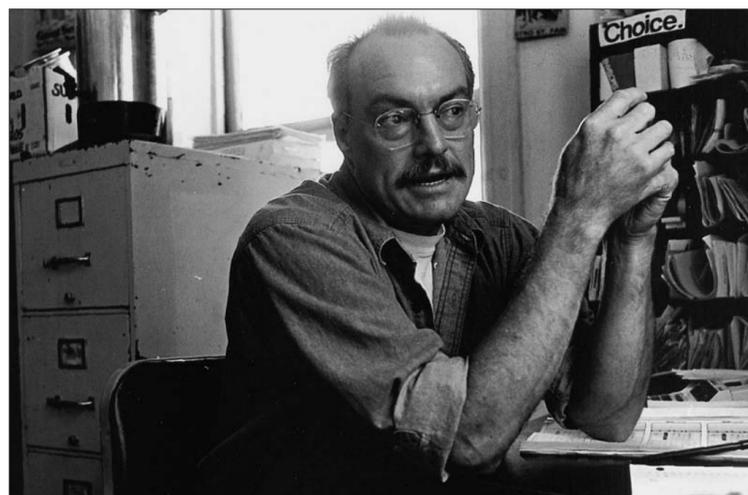


PHOTO BY DON FUSCO

Henry Wilson left his imprint on the Tenderloin. His legend lives on in the Ambassador Hotel, the amalgam of AIDS programs that is Tenderloin Health and in the work of Network Ministries.

Lanza saw a want ad for an SRO hotel manager and they got the job. The next year, Mr. Wilson leased the 150-room Ambassador Hotel and his legendary impact on the neighborhood began. AIDS wasn't yet known.

Word soon spread that the Ambassador was a haven for the poor and afflicted. Mr. Wilson seldom said no to anyone.

Tom Calvanese, a freelance marine biologist now, worked seven years with Mr. Wilson in the Ambassador's wildest days. His interview to be Mr. Wilson's assistant, he told the memorial crowd, consisted mostly of Mr. Wilson telling about dire episodes at the hotel "and giving me reasons not to work there." But Calvanese, too, couldn't resist the challenge at the barrel's bottom. He took the job and was soon marveling at Mr. Wilson in action.

HE LIVED FOR THE WORK

"He had a selfless compassion, incredible grace and demeanor to continue in this madness," Calvanese said. "He was this combination of qualities — I've never seen anyone embody more — and he lived for it (the work), and he got people to help in it."

"It was 35 years of doing this shit. He worked hard and could do so many things at once. But he didn't burn out. His key advice was: 'Pace yourself.' At the right time, he'd go off and swim 50 laps at the Y and come back."

"He was brilliant, too. He had these ideas, and never spent much time thinking. He just did them and left the rest to others. Those were just details, he said. It was the big idea that counted, like, 'People with AIDS can have a decent life.'"

In 1980, Hope ran a roving "house church" project. She, staff and volunteers went into SROs just to talk to and listen to poor people. Sometimes there would be prayer or Bible study, but the idea was to be present to support people. She knew the kinds of people Mr. Wilson was bringing into the Ambassador.

"Hank was hesitant at first to let us come in," she says. "I guess he had had some bad experiences with religious people beating people over the head with the Bible. But little by little he came to trust us, and then he started giving us names of people to visit."

"Later, he gave us his small office to use and he'd go away. It held maybe eight people." Mr. Wilson said to her one day that people were dying on the street at an alarming rate. Nobody knew what was happening — there wasn't a name for it yet — but he wanted those people at the Ambassador.

Hope remembers the first death in the win-

ter of 1987 officially linked to the nascent AIDS epidemic. Mel Wald was a member of the hotel's active group despite his plummeting health. They found him sweating with a high fever in bed, nearly unconscious, and took him to a hospice where he soon died. Mr. Wilson wanted a panel for Mr. Wald in the AIDS quilt that had begun in 1992, but it never happened.

"Hank said he was going to take into the hotel all the homeless people with AIDS and would I help," Hope said. "I told him yes. Nobody was doing anything. And we didn't know what it would be."

Network Ministries had an Urban Ministries training program then. Out of it came Penny Sarvis, a Brown University graduate, divorcee and lesbian "perfect" for the Ambassador.

"She really picked up the work for us. Hank would leave her a note for who to visit. And everybody loved Penny. She was one who cared, a good listener with a big heart."

"I did some of it. People died pretty fast, maybe one a week. Hank was taking in really sick people and there was no medication."

His staff would have horrified the religious right.

NURSE JOINS THE EFFORT

"Hank was running the hotel with an all-queer staff: drag queens, pre-op and post-op transsexuals, dykes and fags, queers of all colors," Ostertag wrote. "As AIDS began to fill the hotel, somehow Hank connected with a nurse who, during his off hours from his full-time nursing job, would come to the Ambassador and provide nursing to scores of dying people, working out of the trunk of his car."

Besides the nurse and the clergy, Mr. Wilson got Project Open Hand, the Visiting Nurses Association, Lutheran Social Services and others involved. Shanti wasn't interested, saying it was "too occupied with the Castro," Hope said. "Of course, we had different people dying here, the poor and destitute."

"But you just didn't say no to Hank, even if you didn't know where it led. He saw that where people lived they needed these services. And he was the first, honest to God."

Calvanese said people were attracted by this emerging model of care.

"But mostly we were attracted by this force in the middle of it all named Hank Wilson."

Mr. Wilson had no nonprofit organization. If the Ambassador's landlord wouldn't fix something like an elevator, he'd dig into his own pocket. He had a knack for knowing what touched people, too. Calvanese recalled at the memorial that Mr. Wilson bought flats of

seedling plants to give to tenants so they could nurture life, a subtle image for their individual and collective struggles.

"Tenants trashed the place a lot and didn't pay rent," Hope said. "These weren't appealing people. But it didn't matter to Hank as long as he could do something for them. He'd evict some, then let them come back. I saw a woman on the stairs once he had kicked out the week before and I asked why she's here. Hank said, 'Well, she didn't have a place to stay.'"

At the memorial, Hope acknowledged a remark Calvanese made years ago, saying, "Tom said it best — 'Hank not only forgave, he forgot.'"

Mr. Wilson was aware some people thought he was nuts.

"I know people laugh at me and what I do," Hope said he once confided to her. "But I like that about myself."

Mr. Wilson launched harm reduction 10 years before the approach even had a name here. In practice, the approach recognizes that you can do drugs, be an addict even, but don't harm yourself or the people around you.

"Hank and company were providing homeless services beyond what the city agencies were providing, without a penny of public money, paid for by the meager resources of the clients themselves," Ostertag wrote. "This was not supposed to be possible."

Meanwhile, Mr. Wilson was creating organizations away from the hotel like ACT UP and LYRIC, and even helped Lanza start a gay cabaret.

It was evident to Hope, Mr. Wilson and their support team that the Tenderloin desperately needed the city's help, especially for prevention and harm reduction measures. But the city thought the AIDS problem lay mainly with the Castro's better-groomed citizens.

"The city wouldn't listen," Hope said.

But then a \$2,500 grant from Columbia Foundation came to the activists' group. Led by Mr. Wilson, Hope and Dennis Conkin, and coalesced in 1985 as Tenderloin AIDS Network, they hired an analyst to do a neighborhood "needs assessment." The recommendations were to get a storefront out of which to dispense condoms, bleach and disinfectant for needles, make referrals to city programs and send out "CHOWs," low-paid community health outreach workers, to spread the word.

Until the late 1980s, Hope said, the city said it had no money for this sort of thing. "But then the heavens opened up."

A particularly rainy season brought the city an excess of hydroelectric energy to sell. Program possibilities opened up. And the 3-year-old AIDS Network, with no office, successfully answered the Department of Health's request for proposals and became the Tenderloin AIDS Resource Center with \$100,000 funding. Mr. Wilson, a co-founder, wanted to be close to clients and not be the boss. So he managed the drop-in center to provide support to the homeless and AIDS victims. He had been diagnosed with the disease the year before.

HE GETS AIDS

The center moved into a battered, abandoned storefront with narrow cubicles on Golden Gate Avenue in 1990, as AIDS raged on.

"Hank had AIDS himself," Ostertag wrote. "Bad AIDS. Terrible Kaposi Sarcoma. Lesions all over his body and eventually on his face. Tuberculosis. And finally AIDS-related dementia. Protease inhibitors came along just in the nick of time to pull his one foot out of the grave and give him back his health."

Still, Mr. Wilson managed the Ambassador. When Father John Hardin of St. Anthony Foundation wanted to join in, Mr. Wilson gave him, Hope and the nurse a bigger room, — "one he could have rented," Hope recalled — so a chaplain was present every day.

(Even now under TNDC ownership, the concept lives on in an Ambassador mezzanine

room called the Listening Post, where Network Ministries volunteers still go, and where memorials are held.)

"Meanwhile, Hank is involved all the way," Hope said. "He started ACT UP because he thought all this was taking too long. He was like that. He wanted things done at once. He kept pushing us. And that was good."

In the early 1990s the Metropolitan Community Church gave annual awards to "living saints" for their neighborhood work and wanted to name him. Mr. Wilson never wanted recognition or praise, but Hope convinced him to accept by arguing that the award "recognized the value of the work."

"It was given, by the way, in the basement of St. Mary's Cathedral," Hope said. "And when his name was mentioned the place erupted in cheers — they'd never had a chance to cheer him before."

Mr. Wilson later told Hope he was "happy" about it. "He was never effusive. Most of the time he was ready to criticize."

In 1996, after 18 years, Mr. Wilson left the Ambassador to care for his dying parents. Then he came back and picked up his work at TARC and was a mentor to scores of volunteers and staff. As manager of the homeless resource center, he was "the warrior" who maintained the direct "thread" to the community, TL Health spokesman Colm Hegarty said.

"He was a true advocate and mentor on every level of life for so many who were so desperately ill and in need of help — in a time when few were paid attention to this neighborhood and its residents," Hegarty said.

TENDERLOIN HEALTH IS FORMED

Mr. Wilson quit in 2006 when TARC merged with Continuum HIV Day Services to form Tenderloin Health. That year he went to work on an unusual homeless program at St. Boniface Church that offered its sanctuary pews during the day for sleeping. He finally stopped when his medical treatments became too much of a drain.

"There's no telling how many thousands he helped," Hope said.

One was Norman Hampton, 56, a Tenderloin Health staffer who led the AIDS Day memorial for Mr. Wilson. Hampton returned to San Francisco from Ohio in 2005 after shaking a drug habit. He landed at TARC, where Mr. Wilson, after several calls, got him a shelter bed. Two days later Hampton came back to volunteer.

"I didn't know any of the clients, but they all said this was a good place. And Hank treated me like a person. I was motivated. My passion is helping people, I told him."

After a few months, Mr. Wilson asked the rangy black man to join the staff.

"I'm a slow learner," Hampton said one afternoon in a TL coffee shop. "I'm living with AIDS and it was real motivation to have Hank there. He was easygoing, nothing bothered him. He was dedicated, loving, understanding — in a word, a real human being."

Mr. Wilson turned over two of his group sessions to Hampton. One emphasizes positive movement in life, the other encourages purging stultifying thoughts that block personal growth. And Mr. Wilson gave Hampton other responsibilities that showed his trust in him.

"It was the jump-start I needed," Hampton said. "I don't have a high school education but I've been trained in life. Hank could talk and train people on many levels, and his humor always kept me going. I never saw him in an altercation."

"The master has left this world," he said. At the memorial, Blackberri concluded by asking everyone to "Hold on to Hank."

And in her office, Hope said, "He'll be honored for his action. But the Hank I loved was the other person. What an odd couple we were." ■



Glenda Hope (left) and Hank Wilson at the Ambassador in 1987. "More than any other person I've known, he showed me the meaning — taught me — forgiveness and unconditional love."

good friend. On Network Ministries' 17-minute DVD about its work made in 2006, Wilson, a stout 5-foot-11, illuminates some causes of homelessness among the TL's gay population.

"He was a giant in my life," Hope said. "More than any other person I've known, he showed me the meaning — taught me — forgiveness and unconditional love. I adored him."

Henry "Hank" Wilson, gay activist, innovator and humble servant of the Tenderloin's sick, poor and homeless, died Nov. 9 at Davies Medical Center. Mr. Wilson, a nonsmoker who had survived the ravages of HIV/AIDS, died of lung cancer. He was 61.

Mr. Wilson's achievements are so epic some of his friends have called him the "Mother Teresa of the Tenderloin." Others said he created so many organizations here and in the Castro that he was the "Johnny Appleseed" of gay and AIDS causes. He clearly had no equal.

Born in Sacramento, he came to San Francisco in the 1970s after getting a B.A. degree in education from the University of Wisconsin. Soon the handsome, energetic young kindergarten and grade school teacher was fighting for gay equality in city schools and against a national anti-gay movement led by religious right-wingers.

Mr. Wilson and fellow teacher Tom Ammiano, who became a supervisor and now is a state assemblyman, successfully helped defeat the statewide Briggs initiative that