

GARRISON SMITH JR.
Elevator mechanic

It was the best of times when Garrison Smith Jr., formerly homeless, lived in his clean, well-lit SRO. People liked and admired him. He was honest, quiet, supportive and a smart chess player.

But even his dying too young was not the worst of times, his friends who were missing him knew.

"It's an awkward moment," said Joe Jackson, one of 13 mourners who gathered in the Coast Hotel at Mr. Smith's memorial on Jan. 27. A variety of white flowers on a forest green clothed table made a handsome bouquet with three lighted candles to each side.

"I don't remember what he died of," continued Jackson, the hotel's tenant representative. "But he died with a roof over his head among friends. He didn't die on the street. We can thank a lot of people for that and the mayor."

The Coast is a Care Not Cash hotel for formerly homeless welfare clients. Its 124 rooms house 150 people.

Mr. Smith collapsed while walking in the neighborhood and was taken to St. Francis Memorial Hospital where he died Jan. 19. He was 54. His friends said he suffered from diabetes. The medical examiner's office said cause of death is pending.

The mourners described him as a guy who always said hello, never lied, was "good people in a very difficult neighborhood," and a valued friend.

"All I can say is rest in peace, Garrison," said one man, sobbing. "Thanks for letting me know you."

Darwin Golden said he was in a St. Boniface shelter with Mr. Smith three years ago before they got housing at the Coast. He lightened the mood with an anecdote.

"He couldn't pronounce my name," Golden said, "He'd introduce me as darlin' and then tell people we used to sleep together. I had to correct him and say, 'at a shelter.'"

Another mourner said Mr. Smith's death was bad timing. He had worked at least 10 years as an elevator mechanic — once solving a problem when the Coast's elevator broke down — and "soon" was to come into some retirement money.

Mr. Smith surely would have liked his tribute.

"We're community," said Jackson, a 20-year resident who was grandfathered back in to the Coast after its renovation as Care Not Cash housing. "The counselors do a good job here. It all gives people a little dignity. We even honor our dead pets." ■

—TOM CARTER

LAWRENCE MILLER
Bicycle benefactor

Lawrence Miller made bicycles from scavenged parts, then gave the bikes away. A quiet man, he hadn't been a resident of the Ambassador Hotel long enough to gift many of his fellow tenants, but he made an impression anyway.

Mr. Miller, tall and lean, moved quietly into a fourth-floor room in February 2006 and pretty much kept to himself.

"He was a good tenant and didn't seem to need us," said hotel social worker Rachel Throm at Mr. Miller's memorial Nov. 9 at the Ambassador. The Rev. Glenda Hope conducted the memorial that was held in the second floor Listening Post room. "He was a good guy, sweet," said another social worker.

"If you went by his room he always said hello," said Larry Edmond. "I had a vinyl record album but no record player. He sold me his for \$12. It was

worth a lot more than that."

When Mr. Miller wasn't out searching for used bicycle parts in the neighborhood, he was in his room assembling one. He kept his room neat and clean, his friends said. The parts were organized in one place and he worked on just one bicycle at a time.

"He gave me three bicycles," said Richard Zinser. "And he always asked me if I needed any help."

Mr. Miller worked until the day he died — Oct. 31 — probably of AIDS, his friends said. He was found in his room. He was 49.

"He was very sick at the end and worked until he couldn't get up to answer the door," said his neighbor, Gerry Kirby. "Other people were affected by his death. There were more arguments, people jumping to anger. I think they were acting out their hurt, their emotions."

Kirby couldn't say for sure that Mr. Miller died of AIDS, only that he had exhibited symptoms of the disease. "His hair had straightened out and his eyes were large (and dull)," he said.

The Listening Post room was originated in 1984 during the AIDS epidemic as a place where residents could come and talk with someone from Network Ministries. It was a project of the Rev. Hope, Ministries executive director.

Now, doubling as a library, the Listening Post is open three or four times a week from 3 to 4:30 p.m. Volunteers, including Hope, show up to listen. No one knew whether Mr. Miller had ever dropped in.

But despite his limited time at the Ambassador, Hope said, "he had quite an impact." ■

—TOM CARTER

GEORGE TIRADO
Poet, co-founder Molotov Mouths

Chicano poet and activist George Tirado was passionate about his art — spoken word — and his passion exploded on stages, on DVDs and CDs, at festivals and cultural events.

Mr. Tirado died unexpectedly Jan. 16 at the Empress Hotel where he'd lived for a year. It was his mother in Texas who had the idea of a spoken word memorial for him at the hotel.

As about 30 people were gathering in the hotel community room Feb. 18, a large monitor at the front of the room was playing a DVD of Mr. Tirado and other artists reading at City Lights bookstore in 2001. His piece was called "509 years," a poem that also appeared in the 2003 book *Molotov Mouths, Explosive New Writing*. Mr. Tirado was a co-founder of the Molotov Mouths, a political word troupe with a social justice message.

On the DVD, Mr. Tirado begins in his low, dramatic voice, "I was born into two worlds, one of the earth, my skin brown from the sun, and my heart charged with the power of the sun, and my mind able to contemplate the complexities of the gods." Like a Greek chorus, other performers on stage with him intone, "509 years, 509 years, 509 years."

Empress Property Manager Roberta Goodman brought a telephone into the community room. On the speakerphone was Mr. Tirado's mother. Goodman checked every now and then to make sure she could hear what people were saying about her son.

"George was a complex fellow," Goodman began, "and for a year he graced us with his presence here at the Empress. We're all grateful to have known him." ■

He was part of a writing project that Goodman introduced at the hotel, an offshoot of Community Works/West, which uses the arts and education to help underserved populations such as women coming out of jail and people in recovery. The project was coordinated at the Empress by Tanya Perlman.



Perlman held a fat sheaf of papers. "I know George was complicated," she said, "but I got to know him through his writing. He believed there was a huge responsibility to put one's writing out there." Perlman said plans are in the works to publish Mr. Tirado's works, as well as others' in the program. Then she read four of his powerful pieces — about his mother, about what was in his pockets, about his drug habits, about Tonia.

Others at the memorial described their relationship with Mr. Tirado or read their own compositions. One was the photographer Nappy Chin, who lives at the Empress:

"George, you pissed me off," he began. "You could have given me a hint."

Another resident, Angela, recalled how she and Mr. Tirado talked about their speed days: "We'd talk for hours. We were going to take a long, long trip, maybe on a boat."

Josiah Luis Alderete, one of the Molotov Mouths, said, "George had a lot of Georges inside of him — some who inspired me, some I couldn't trust. Don't make a saint of him. Remember all of him."

Alderete then read "Poesia" by Mr. Tirado. An excerpt: "This guy once asked me, 'Why don't you write like Pablo Neruda?' I laughed as I found my favorite spot on 16th and Mission. . . . There is nothing more promising than the twinkle in the eye of an early morning score when you know everything is good. . . . In the corner of my eye I see Satan lurking in the shadows, he's dressed in his favorite hoodie."

Junebug, also a Molotov Mouths member, said writing helps her keep her sanity. "I can't believe George is gone." Then she read a poem she said she wrote at Hospitality House in honor of Mr. Tirado, which began, "Que pasó, wassup, wassup, wassup."

The Internet is filled with references to Mr. Tirado's work, his life and his death.

Writer and comedian Bucky Sinister, a fellow performer, wrote on his blog about Mr. Tirado's art, his physical size — 400 to 500 pounds, he says — and his destructive drug use: "George and I shared a fascination with dirty, earth-bound angels as images in our work. . . . I always hoped he would show up at a 12 Step meeting. About a half dozen of us from the same circle, out of all of us who got high and drunk together, are 12 Steppers. But too many, like George, didn't make it past fifty. Fifty used to seem like forever away, back when 25 sounded old. George, you fat fuck, you tenderloin death star, you Oxycontin troll under a self-burned bridge. I used to be jealous of you. I've missed you for years."

Mr. Tirado is survived by his mother, one brother in Texas and another brother in Arizona. ■

—MARJORIE BEGGS



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