

CLYDE WOOD
Vietnam veteran

Until his death two weeks before his 58th birthday, Clyde Wood felt he was haunted by bad luck, and the worst of it was post traumatic stress disorder that stemmed from his Vietnam War days under fire as a young Marine.

He didn't talk much about these things, even to his caseworker. From the outset he appeared to be a crusty customer when he moved into his sixth floor room at the Care Not Cash Coast Hotel three years ago, which ended his homelessness.

Mr. Wood kept mostly to himself. But gradually, when he left his room using a walker, dozens of residents came in contact with him, and most reached out to him when his health began failing seven months ago. They then found him to be a nice man with a penchant for giving away candy and rewarding people for their kindnesses.

"He gave my daughter candy," said a young blonde mother at Mr. Wood's memorial March 19 at the hotel. "And when I carried his groceries upstairs for him, the next day he tried to give me a dollar. But I wouldn't accept it."

"He was really kind," said another woman. "He gave my dog treats. I'd walk around the block with him all the time."

"A friend told me he had a bad side and could raise hell," said a man. "But so many of us never saw that."

Mr. Wood was the third Coast resident to die in three months and the mood in the SRO was especially somber.

Dennis Reynolds, Mr. Wood's caseworker, saw him the most. Reynolds is a Vietnam War veteran suffering from PTSD, too. He uses a cane now because an old leg wound flared up. Based on their common experiences, he could be expected to build rapport with the reticent man.

"I met him two years ago when I started," Reynolds said, "and he was a distrustful, crotchety old guy and very private about his past. He was using the walker then. When his health started failing, he said he was okay. He didn't access our services either. But that was his choice."

"He was in Vietnam about the same time I was," Reynolds said later. "There was a lot he wouldn't talk about. And he was distraught about things that had happened to him in his life. He had a hard exterior. I think he was very alone. But he had a lot of friends here and in the neighborhood, and they showed up to help him downstairs. He'll be missed."

Other than his military service, little was known about Mr. Wood's past.

Mr. Wood, despite the walker, looked healthy until seven months ago, when he started to decline. Another piece of bad luck followed in January and February. The hotel elevator was out of order for 23 days, according to residents. Mr. Wood struggled up and down the stairs, weak and losing weight from his 5-foot-8 frame. One resident who had helped him said it took Mr. Wood "two hours" to get up and down from the sixth floor.

In February, Mr. Wood was taken to the VA Hospital. When he returned three weeks later, Reynolds thought his health would improve. But it wasn't the case.

March 5, when Mr. Wood summoned Reynolds to his room to check his "bugged" telephone, the caseworker was shocked at the sight of him standing at the door in his socks and underwear.

"He weighed 50 pounds if he weighed an ounce," Reynolds said. "He was a living skeleton."

That day an ambulance took Mr. Wood back to the VA Hospital. He died three days later. The VA would not reveal the cause of death. Mr. Wood was buried with honors at the Golden Gate National Cemetery in San Bruno. ■

—TOM CARTER

KAREN MONJE
A spotless housekeeper

Karen Monje was remembered as a no-nonsense but caring person at a March 6 memorial at the Lyric Hotel on Jones Street.

She died on the floor of her bathroom, said Chris Eunice, her husband and caregiver. "She just went to sleep." She was taking methadone and other prescription medications and had been found unconscious by others many times, he said. She was 56.

Ms. Monje was born in San Francisco in 1952, he said. Her mother died years ago, but she had several sisters and two children, although Eunice said he had been unable to locate them.

With the exception of Eunice, the only mourners at the service led by Rev. Glenda Hope were hotel staff, a few fellow residents and a man named James, who knew Ms. Monje when she lived at Canon Kip. James recalled her as "a nice lady."

"She was always a cheery, happy person," he said. "She seemed even happier after she moved to the Lyric. It brought more structure to her life."

One of her neighbors shared less pleasant memories of Monje. "I found her to be rude and loud," he said. "The first thing she ever said to me was 'Do you have a microwave oven?' I said no, and she never said another thing to me."

He recalled seeing her on the street, unable to stand, and watching other people trying to steal from her. "I think in reality she had a good heart," he concluded. "She made me realize I wasn't very friendly either. I'm sorry she's gone."

"Over time, I found her to be a nice and caring person, although she did keep to herself," a hotel staff member said.

Eunice said that Ms. Monje had been on disability since getting in a car accident with her son several years ago. Her 4-year-old son was unhurt, but she was severely injured and in a coma for days. "She was lucky to be alive," he said.

He said he met her 25 years ago in the Mission District; they married 15 years later at City Hall.

"She kept the house spotless," said Eunice, who's been married three times. "She was the best woman I ever had."

He thanked everyone for attending her memorial service. "I have a lot of pain and sadness right now," he said as tears came to his eyes. "It's a rough world out there. Enjoy life as long as you have it." ■

—HEIDI SWILLINGER

MICHELLE VAN RIJN
'Soul and sunlight'

A roomful of distraught mourners gathered March 6 to remember Michelle Van Rijn, who jumped to her death from a window in the five-story Coast Hotel, where she had been a resident. She was 49.

Residents described her as a woman "full of genuine soul and sunlight" who was warm and caring toward everyone she met.

One man said that though he'd known her only a few months, she always looked out for him. The

week before she died, Ms. Van Rijn knocked on his door early one morning to make sure he kept his General Assistance appointment, and even gave him \$2 for the bus. "She was supportive of everything I've ever done," he said.



Another man recalled Ms. Van Rijn reaching out to him when he was going through a particularly troubled time. "I had a dire need, and she looked after me," he said. "She always had a happy smile and a cheery attitude."

One man said Ms. Van Rijn had spent time in Zimbabwe, and may have been born there.

Nearly two dozen people gathered in a circle in the sun-drenched community room of the Coast Hotel, as the Rev. Glenda Hope conducted Ms. Van Rijn's memorial. Several wept openly, others comforted a man who was distraught.

"Michelle and I met in precarious places," he told the group. "But even on the worst days, we'd find some magic."

A table held a photo of Ms. Van Rijn, bouquets of flowers and candles. One tenant brought a book of drawings Ms. Van Rijn had made of his dog, which died recently. She had done a good likeness from a photograph, and also had done a second drawing of the dog with wings. In beautiful calligraphy, she had written, "I see him skipping now, because you gave him wings of love — look how big his wings are."

The manner of her death was a particularly harsh blow for her friends at the Coast Hotel, where many residents are physically or mentally fragile. Before her memorial service began, a staff member reminded the group to reach out for help if they are troubled, and added that special grief support groups will be offered for a few weeks.

Nobody expected her suicide, said one resident after the service ended. "Everything I got from her was always positive," he said. "She had one of the straightest heads of anyone in this hotel." ■

—HEIDI SWILLINGER

RONALD URRUTIA
Musician

When he was well and still active, Ronald Urrutia used to play the piano in the lobby of the Alexander Residence, delighting fellow residents and staff. On weekends, he'd dress up sharp and play gigs, performing on keyboard, cello, flute or congas.

But the music has been silenced. Mr. Urrutia died Feb. 9 from sarcoma, a soft tissue cancer that was being treated with chemotherapy. He was 55.

At a Feb. 26 memorial in the Alexander's community room, 20 residents and friends gathered to remember Mr. Urrutia. Sister Irene McDonnell of St. Anthony Foundation officiated.

"I was his hotel social worker here," said Betty Duran. "Whenever we had a party, Ronald always volunteered to play his drums — it always made the party more alive. But after he was sick, he couldn't play. He had a provider who came to help him, and I brought him food. He was very kind and generous with a big heart."

Mr. Urrutia's sister, who lives in Brisbane, told The Extra that her brother was born in San Francisco, was a vet and had worked for the city as a driver before he went on disability.

"He had a lot of life in him," she said. "He was a caring person — he gave food to the homeless — and I was very close to him. He was my only family. I loved him and I miss him."

At the memorial, resident Devra Worcester said she'd been friends with Mr. Urrutia for "10 or 15 years," as long as they both had lived at the Alexander. "He had a lot to give, but his illness kept him from giving. I know he was working on a piano composition, working over and over and over on it. I hope he finished it."

Fellow musician Jerry Tubis said he and Mr. Urrutia had been good friends for several years, united by their common love of music.

"Ron had such a big heart," Tubis said, "and he was always straight up with people — he either loved or hated you. And he was very religious."

Tubis said Mr. Urrutia was diagnosed with cancer last year, but he was taking care of himself: "The last time I saw him, two days before he died, I think he sensed his time was coming to a close."

Mr. Urrutia had been released from the hospital several days before he died, in his room at the Alexander. ■

—MARJORIE BEGGS

Peer Support Line
575-1400
Office of Self-Help
1095 Market St., Suite 202