

JASON BISHOP
A merry prankster

The Library and Listening Post is a cozy room just off the roof garden at the Ambassador Hotel, 55 Mason St. It was barely large enough to hold two staff members, four residents and Buddy, a small, well-behaved dog belonging to resident Kellie Noss. All were assembled there Feb. 22 to remember resident Jason Bishop, who had died several weeks earlier at age 40.

"Jason made people laugh," Noss said. "And Buddy loved him."

Gerry Kirby, an Ambassador resident since 1999, said he and Mr. Bishop had a lot in common — "people we knew and bad habits, but we had our clear moments. What a full life he had! He was an AIDS advocate, starting when he was 14 or 15, but he also had a wild sense of humor."

Kirby praised Mr. Bishop for the work he did "to make the world better. It's really hard to hold onto this, but it's important not to give up 'cause you can live better, feel better, and you don't need to get

stuck in a routine," Kirby said.

Mr. Bishop's mother, who lives in Penn Valley in the Sierra foothills, later told The Extra that her son's advocacy was a source of pride for her. He was active in Reach Out, a mental health resource group, Act Up for AIDS advocacy, the Tenderloin AIDS Resource Center (now Tenderloin Health), and was a senior outreach counselor for Hospitality House, she said.

"He watched every one of his friends die of AIDS," she said. "There was no one left for him."

Mr. Bishop, who grew up in San Mateo, moved into the Ambassador in 2006, but kept his close connection with his mother. Social worker Rachael Throm said she could always tell when he'd been with his family because he just looked better. Mr. Bishop went home at Christmas and died there the first week in February.

"I was comforted to know he was with his mother when he passed," Throm said.

Another friend at the Ambassador was Minyon Harlin, who recalled how she and Mr. Bishop would visit in each other's rooms and play pranks on other people. "We also did recycling together," Harlin said. "I'd go speak at school and he always encouraged me to keep it up."

While Mr. Bishop urged others to stay the course, he wasn't good at taking care of himself, said Jim Johnson, a money manager for Conard House, who said he knew Mr. Bishop for five years. "I've learned that people don't do what they need to do for themselves, and I've learned to accept people as they are. Jason, he had a gift — he was upbeat despite his problems."

Without knowing it, Mr. Bishop may have left a cheerful legacy. Another resident admitted, shyly, "I find myself doing little pranks, like he did, making people laugh." ■

—MARJORIE BEGGS

ROBERT SMITH
Radio announcer

Robert Smith — ever grateful for his own SRO accommodations — was just at ease in City Hall as on the street when expounding in his resonant

voice on his favorite topic: affordable housing for the poor.

He was a familiar sight alongside fellow activists, a tall, thin Southern gentleman dressed typically in T-shirt and baseball cap and carrying a rumpled paperback mystery novel held together with a rubber band.

"He had a knack for simplifying gobbledygook and making things understandable," said James Tracy of the Community Housing Partnership, who was among more than a dozen mourners at Mr. Smith's March 18 memorial at the CHP-owned and -operated Senator Hotel. "He was always very excited about housing and knew how to use his voice for public speaking."

Mr. Smith, an 11-year resident of the Senator, died in the hotel March 7 at age 52. The medical examiner has not yet determined the cause of death.

His friends said Mr. Smith was from Alabama where he had been a radio announcer, and that he came to San Francisco in the 1980s. Tracy said Mr. Smith was seeking a more tolerant environment but later realized that real change to eliminate racism would "have to come up from the South" — because he thought people here "were too polite" to confront racism.

Mr. Smith testified at hearings for affordable housing for the poor, was active with the Coalition on Homelessness and promoted Safe Havens, where shopkeepers offer safety and a phone call to people fleeing street violence. Mr. Smith served on the neighborhood committee of activists that adopted the Safe Haven concept four years ago.

"He had a Southern accent and was always pleasant and thoughtful," said one mourner.

"He was very grateful for the services at the hotel and often expressed that," said another. "He was glad to be here. But outside of his activism, he kept to himself."

Tracy will remember Mr. Smith as a "Southern gentleman" who was always ready to help causes that aid the poor.

"I could put him on a phone bank — and with that voice — he was fantastic," Tracy said. ■

—TOM CARTER

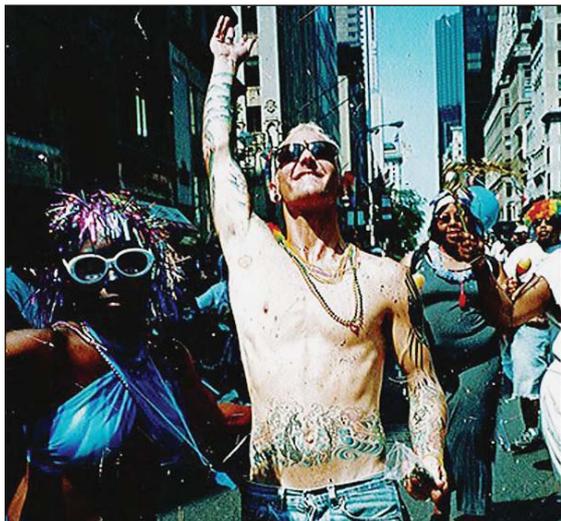


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Jason Bishop in a parade in New York.

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