

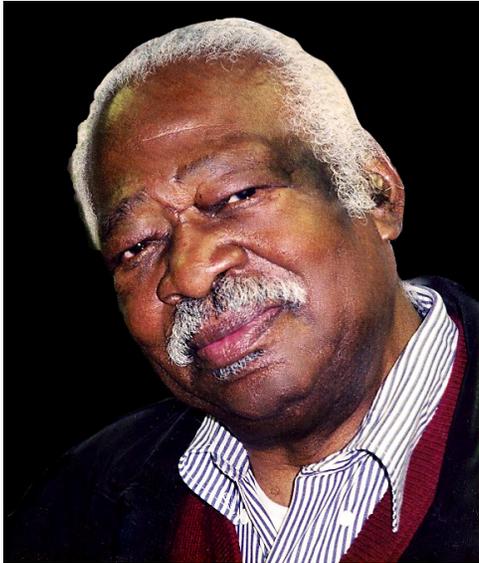
Leroy Looper, champion of the down and out, dies

By Kevin Fagan, *Chronicle Staff Writer*

Tenderloin icon Leroy Looper had just finished his speech at a class reunion of his alma mater, Antioch College West in San Francisco, thanking everyone in his typically humble manner for the good work they did in helping him lift up others.

Then he sat down - and as applause washed over him, he passed out. He never revived. Four days later (September 11, 2011), he was dead of heart failure.

And with that, San Francisco lost one of its greatest champions for the down and out - a man who



founded supportive housing and a galaxy of national and local programs to help youths, drug addicts, prisoners and the mentally ill.

Mr. Looper was 86 when he gave that final speech Sept. 8 at McCormick & Kuleto's restaurant in San Francisco. His wife, Kathy Looper, said that if he had to go, that was the way - having just finished a fine seafood meal, with friends all around hailing him for a lifetime of good works.

"Leroy was one of a kind, larger than life, but what always struck me most about him was his gentleness," Kathy Looper said. "He was a gentle giant."

Treatment programs

Mr. Looper rose to local prominence in 1969 when he founded the Reality House West drug treatment program in San Francisco, after having founded a similar program in New York City. In 1977 he turned the Cadillac Hotel on Eddy Street into the first single-room-occupancy complex owned by a nonprofit in California, and in 1978 he founded the Chateau Agape board-and-care home for the mentally ill.

The Cadillac, which is still operating and features grand-piano concerts in its lobby, became a national supportive housing pioneer as its staff helped connect the low-income residents with job and counseling services. Chateau Agape burned down in 1994, but by then it had also earned a national reputation for its unusually sensitive care, surrounding residents with patient counselors amid elegant furniture and stained glass windows.

In 1990, Mr. Looper co-founded YouthBuild USA to help underprivileged youths build affordable housing and learn job skills. To date, the organization has helped 100,000 youths in 45 states and 14 other countries.

Tenderloin's 'mayor'

Mr. Looper also co-founded the Tenderloin AIDS Network and was a leader in the 1981 zoning effort that protected the district's housing, earning him the nickname "Mayor of the Tenderloin."

"His work in the Tenderloin did more than lift up a single neighborhood; it ignited a national movement to secure sustainable, affordable homes for all families, regardless of their means or background," said House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco. "Our city and our country owe Leroy a debt of gratitude for his passion, his activism and his inspirational drive for social and economic justice."

Born poor

Mr. Looper was born in Pennsylvania to Loveline Branch and Roy Looper, and he grew up poor in Washington, D.C. He struggled early with heroin addiction and alcoholism, but after prison stints for drugs, he got clean in the early 1960s and became a counselor for inmates.

He met his future wife when she volunteered at his drug rehabilitation program in San Francisco, and they married in 1971. A third-grade dropout, Mr. Looper loved reading and went on to earn bachelor's and master's degrees from Antioch College West in 1980 and 1982, and an honorary doctorate from St. Michael's College in Vermont in 1993.

"Sometimes people make poor decisions, but my father always thought that shouldn't preclude them from second chances," said his son Malik Looper. "He thought everyone needed a fair shake."

Randy Shaw, director of the Tenderloin Housing Clinic, called Mr. Looper "a brilliant man and the most street-savvy guy you could ever come across."

"It was never about money with him," Shaw said. "He was always about helping people."

Mr. Looper is survived by his wife, Katherine Looper, in San Francisco; sons Malik, Camlo and Esan Looper, all of San Francisco; a daughter, Agape Adams of Jamaica; and eight grandchildren.

A public celebration of his life will be held Oct. 5 at 5 p.m. at the Cadillac Hotel, 380 Eddy St. in San Francisco.

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