

Inveterate socializer helps infuse St. Francis Square with activities and now, a special celebration of that work

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Jimmye Bynum was such a talkative, sociable person that one of her employers told her she should have been a lawyer. Her natural gift to engage with others led to choices that always seemed to benefit others, as well as herself.

â??I always loved to talk and help people and maybe thatâ??s why my life has been so beautiful,â?• said Bynum.

From dancing with pal Maya Angelou in the heyday of the â??40s jazz and blues scene in the Fillmore, to forming social and philanthropic clubs in the early days of her marriage, to joining every committee in her housing cooperative, Bynum is still talking, organizing and giving to others.



Jimmye Bynum (Photo by Jan Robbins)

This month, the 92-year-old is busy co-chairing the celebration of a decade of organized community activities at St. Francis Square. Bynum and her husband bought an apartment in 1963, the year it was built â?? 299 units in 12 buildings around shared courtyards. Construction was sponsored by two unions with the aim of providing affordable home ownership, particularly for African Americans, who faced housing discrimination in many quarters.

The community activities were initiated 10 years ago by several residents with the support of the Community Living Campaign, a nonprofit created in 2007 to support grass-roots efforts to link formal health and social services with informal support networks for seniors and persons with disabilities.

â??Ten years ago, Marcia Peterzell, a resident and friend of CLCâ??s director, Marie Jobling, approached me and said we have to do something for seniors and shut-ins here at St. Francis Square,â?• Bynum recalled. She and Peterzell started making telephone calls then gathered a group of 18 for monthly meetings they called Coffee and Conversation.

Bynum later started a weekly walking group. And the committee organized a â??Neighbor to Neighborâ?• program, soliciting volunteer residents who could be called on to give a hand: a drive to the grocery store or medical appointment, move a couch, walk a dog.

â??Jimmye Bynumâ??s friendships, flyers, wisdom and steadfast commitment have provided the CLC program at St. Francis Square the foundation and on-going support it needed to grow,â?• said Marie Jobling.

The CLC committee at St. Francis hosts guest speakers, such as doctors, therapists and firemen, in the St. Francis Square social hall. â??We even had a speaker talk to us about how to accept death more easily.â?• One of the favorite group sessions is when massage therapists volunteer their services to members.

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Bynum and her pals, mostly women now, are looking forward to the CLC anniversary party on Dec. 6. This party will be particularly festive â?? with two kinds of eggnog, one spiked with Hennessey. â??Those old ladies can drink,â?• said Bynum. The event will also celebrate this monthâ??s birthdays.

Dancing with Maya Angelou

Festivity has always been a big part of Bynumâ??s life since her father moved the family from Oklahoma to the Fillmore District in 1943. A niece who had opened a restaurant on Sutter Street told him about jobs at Hunterâ??s Point Naval Shipyards that were open to blacks. Once he was hired, Bynumâ??s family settled into life in the Fillmore.

â??At that time Fillmore Street was alive with music and dance,â?• Bynum said. â??My sister and I met Maya Angelou and became general friends. She could jitterbug!â?• Angelou and Bynum would meet for soda pop or ice cream and â??talk, talk and laugh.â?•

At 18, Bynum met Warren â??Dukeâ?• Bynum, eight years her senior, at the Brown Bomber Dance Hall in Marin County. â??He was out of Chicago and most of his friends were boxers like Sugar Ray Robinson and Joe Lewis.â?• They soon married.

Besides the love of dance, Bynum and Duke shared a passion for organizing social clubs that raised money for good causes. â??With many friends, we went on trips and we held formal dances.â?•

For every trip or dance, the social club would tack on an extra charge that went into a pool. â??One thing we did was raise money for a yearly $1,000 scholarship for a deserving youngster with high grades.â?• The scholarships were administered through local churches.

When Bynum married, she and her husband moved to an apartment on Central Street. Every day, driving to work, they passed by the newly built St. Francis Square. It was affordable, it was in the neighborhood they loved and African Americans were welcomed. Her husband suggested they apply.

Once they moved in, they embraced their new community. They both represented their building on the coopâ??s board. â??The only time I left the committee work was when my grandson died when he was 42,â?• she said. He was one of two children of her only son, born in Oklahoma when she was 16. â??I couldnâ??t cope.â?•

A time of good jobs and pensions

During her marriage, Bynum worked first in the garment industry and later in retail sales. â??I was making the side seams of menâ??s jackets and coats, and then I had to hang the sleeves with no fullness. It was very hard.â?• Bynum was proud of her salary and loved her job and the working environment.

In the mid-â??60s, when the clothing manufacturers closed, she found a sales job at the National Dollar Store in the Fillmore. â??A Chinese woman taught me everything and advised me to work the required hours, so Iâ??d get a full pension.â?• Bynum was there for 17 years and retired at 74.

With the Navy shipyard deactivated in 1974, Duke Bynum took some of the only jobs open to blacks at that time. â??First he detailed cars, then worked as a doorman at the Mark Hopkins and finally as a Skycap for American Airlines, where he retired with a good pension,â?• Bynum said.

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Her husband died in 2009. â??We had 57 years of marriage and 40 beautiful years spent in St. Francis Square.â?•

Bynum had moved to San Francisco with six siblings, who have also passed away. Her son, Charles, and his son live out of the city, as do her two great-grandchildren, now in college.

â??Iâ??m all alone in the City now,â?• she said.

Well, not exactly.

Sheâ??s surrounded by all her friends in St. Francis Square. â??I know everyoneâ??s name,â?• she said. Having been on every committee in the coop, sheâ??s ready to slow down.

But not completely. â??Now, Iâ??m just going to stick with CLC.â?•

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