

# Fake cash on upswing with bills just blowin' in the wind

The Extra stumbles onto funny money and checks it out

By MARK HEDIN

THE SECRET SERVICE, everyone knows, protects the safety of presidents and president wannabes. They're in charge of dead presidents, too. The Secret Service is the lead agency in the government's battle against counterfeit currency.

And here in the Bay Area, we're keeping them busy. So much funny money is circulating, one can almost trip over it.

On a hot July afternoon, the smell of urine wafted strong on the wind blowing east down Natoma Street from Sixth. Near the corner, a little piece of paper coated in chlorophyll tumbled toward the ink-stained wretch walking the other way. He quickly bent down to snatch it up, and another rolling along right behind it.

On their face was the scowling visage of the scoundrel President Andrew Jackson, slave owner, Indian conqueror and renowned racist. Jackson is soon to be banished from U.S. currency in favor of abolitionist and underground railroad conductor Harriet Tubman, but this afternoon, he was a hero again.

But Satwinder "Bill" Multani, the ever-cheerful proprietor at Dalda's market on the corner of Eddy and Taylor, did a reality check the next day. Speaking with authority and a smile, he declared those ersatz Jacksons phony as a \$3 bill. He said he sees the like regularly, and showed an array of fakes he keeps taped to the wall behind his cash register to remind his workers to take better care in what they accept. Jackson, Hamilton and even Lin-

➤ CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



One of two counterfeit \$20 bills found by *The Extra* on Natoma Street in July

NO. 169

PUBLISHED BY THE SAN FRANCISCO STUDY CENTER

AUGUST 2016



## ON WAY TO LEGACY STATUS

9 businesses get over 1st hurdle

PAGE 3

## CENTRAL CITY OBITUARIES

James Schelske, Christopher Edwards

PAGE 7

## CHECK OUT TRUMPTY DUMPTY

He could be ready for a very big fall

PAGE 8

# CENTRAL CITY

# EXTRA!

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## DIVERSE CITY



In his Curran House studio, Abraham Weldeselassie shows his pride of country with an Eritrean poster. His shelves display a commemorative plate of President Obama and family mementos.

# New American's dream

## Eritrean survives adversity, finally finds a good life

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TOM CARTER

**S**PICY, PUNGENT AROMAS from a steaming dinner platter 2 feet in diameter throw Abraham Weldeselassie gleefully back in time and into a reverie.

The highly seasoned East African food swirls in his head before it hits his mouth. Succulent chunks of lamb, beef and chicken surrounded by an array of delicately seasoned vegetables fill the platter — in the middle, to counter the heat: the traditional scoop of yogurt.

"All mothers in Eritrea cook this way," Abraham says and smiles, his dark eyes wide and gleaming, his hand inviting. "This is our culture."

One other table is occupied at 5:30 p.m. as Matheos Johannes, who opened Assab Eritrean restaurant on Geary Boulevard near Masonic Avenue 13 years ago, comes by with steaming plates of injera. This spongy flatbread is made of teff, the ancient, tiny, gluten-free grain grown in the Horn of Africa. Teff is a new specialty crop in four states, including California. Tear off a piece to scoop up the food.

"Would you like a fork?" Johannes asks.

"No thanks," I say, I'm going native.

The meal is the zenith of the Eritrean experience that Abraham has promised me following many hours over months discussing his

history. He's a diminutive, sincere man of 64 given to reminiscing about his homeland and proudly pulling up pictures of it on his mobile phone.

Even so, he's in the land of his dreams. He has put his rocky times behind him — he has a criminal record dating to his early days in San Francisco — and has settled into his Curran House studio in the Tenderloin. He lives on a thin income as a part-time cabbie but is secure in his Eritrean community that extends to cousins in San Jose and a niece in Seattle.

Abraham fills us in about the Bay Area's close-knit Eritrean community. There's another Eritrean restaurant in town, over on Ninth Avenue, but Oakland has the mother lode, more than a dozen. And Oakland, with 6,000 Eritreans, is the center of the Bay Area Eritrean community and its 12,000 population. San Francisco has an estimated 2,000, but Abraham isn't sure how many, if any others, live in the Tenderloin.

Besides their food, Eritreans love their independence. After 32 years of fighting, Eritrea, the size of Indiana with 5.3 million people, in 1991 shook free from Ethiopia's annexation. On May 24, the celebrated day, countrymen from San Jose, Santa Rosa and hundreds from San Francisco flocked to Oakland's Eritrean Community Cultural Center to celebrate.

Abraham and 10 others took the nation's red, green and blue flag with centered gold olive branches to Mayor Libby Schaaf's third-floor office, asking her to display it in the hall next to the California flag.

Abraham left his homeland with his father's blessing when the conflict heated up. Young men in Asmara, Eritrea's capital where the family lived, were getting drafted, or shot

➤ CONTINUED ON PAGE 4



# Counterfeit bills passed regularly

‘Widespread problem’ with 75 probes yearly in region, Secret Service says

► CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

coln have a place there.

And over at the Tip-Top on Turk, Jack behind the counter was just as certain those Jacksons were lacking, as he brandished the \$7.99 pen he keeps handy to ensure he’s only taking honest bucks.

The Extra’s Jacksons looked pretty good to a less-trained eye. A little soft, perhaps, but not to someone who’s occasionally, in a purely innocent manner, laundered his money.

## ANGEL SMELLS A RAT

Across the street from the Mission Cultural Center at La Taqueria, Angel, the owner’s son, was the first to smell a rat. He pointed out the lack of a vertical stripe embedded in the paper about a half-inch from the margin. Held up to the light, the Jackson he pulled from the register had it plain as day. He later told The Extra he intercepts a couple of hundred worth of phonies every year.

A kid working the counter at Rainbow Grocery noticed the funny feeling of these bills. So did the gal working the register at a Telegraph Avenue gas station in Oakland.

“Counterfeiting is such a widespread problem,” said David Thomas, special agent in charge of the Secret Service’s San Francisco office. “We conduct an average of 75 counterfeit currency criminal investigations per year in Northern California,” G-man Thomas told The Extra. “Those investigations result in about 30 arrests per year by the Secret Service.”

“Counterfeit currency-passing activity has increased in Northern California from \$4.6 million worth in 2012 to \$6.3 million in FY 2015,” he wrote in an email. “It appears we are on track for right around \$6 million for FY 2016,” which ends Sept. 30.

Local law enforcement agencies, too, prosecute counterfeiting. “Not all are federally prosecuted,” he said. “We work very often with state and local agencies.”

Back in April, for instance, in a Cupertino apartment across the street from Apple Computer offices, the Santa Clara County sheriff arrested a suspect, Eric Aspden, 43, alleging he’d been making six-figure bank for the past year or two, sending bundles of \$20s across the country.

Santa Clara extradited him to Virginia, one of 30 states he’s alleged to have distributed to. He’d made them, the six felony charges say, on inkjet printers and 100% cotton paper, stuff easily purchased at any office supply store.

Turns out, just holding that phony currency is a crime, too, like possession of other controlled substances.

## BANK TELLERS’ KEEN EYES

“We try to collect all the counterfeit currency that gets passed around the world,” Thomas said. It comes to them, he said, “primarily from police departments or bank deposits.”

Bank tellers, he said, are the best



MARK HEDIN

**Satwinder “Bill” Multani** holds some of the counterfeit money his workers mistakenly accepted. He keeps these two and other fake bills taped to the wall behind the register to remind them to be more careful. He knew right away that the \$20 bills The Extra found blowing down a South of Market alley weren’t the real deal. He even has a phony \$5 bill in his collection.

at spotting counterfeits. Also, Thomas said, they do better at confiscating them when they’re presented, given banks’ generally better security than what mom-and-pop stores have. “We would prefer that they (shopkeepers) do take it,” Thomas said, but “our No. 1 concern is for their safety,” and the official recommendation is that merchants report attempts at passing fake currency, with descriptions of the persons of interest.

Despite his efforts, Tip Top’s Jack says he regularly gets notified by his bank that not all of the money he’s deposited is acceptable.

That money, he says, he never sees again. It’s not a lot, \$40-\$100 every month or two, but it’s consistent, he said.

“Most of the victims are going to be smaller businesses,” Thomas said. “It’s like that old game of hot potato. Whoever’s got it last loses.” Sometimes, he said, they get odd-looking money that’s actually the real deal. “A 1935 series bill looks very different,” he said.

Twenties are the most commonly faked currency, he said, followed by 100s, but he’s seen ‘em all. Multani showed The Extra a fake \$5, a \$10 and a \$20.

## \$61 MILLION SO FAR

Counterfeiting in general, Thomas added, “might not get much attention because the victims are spread so thin,” but nationwide so far this fiscal year, he said, the Secret Service has collected \$61 million in phony currency. In his jurisdiction, which ranges up the coast from San Mateo to the Oregon border, it’s \$2.5 million since Oct. 1.

The inland district, including Fresno, San Jose and Sacramento, he said, has taken in another \$2.25 million in the same time period.

“It has become so easy to do with the increase in technology capacity for copying,” Thomas said. “Sixteen-year-old kids might do it for fun.” The maximum sentence on counterfeiting charges, Thomas said, is 20 years. In colonial times, under British rule, counterfeiting was a capital crime.

## COUNTERFEITING CARTELS

Beyond mischievous teenagers with sophisticated computer ware, a bigger problem, Thomas said, lurks in the jungles of South America, where, he alleged, drug cartels have set up sophisticated printing operations to exploit their countries’ “dollarized” economies.

“It’s easy for them to have these large-scale printing operations in the jungle manufacturing high quantities of U.S. currency,” Thomas said. “Some of that makes its way into the United States.” The Secret Service, he said, has 25 foreign offices, besides its presence in all 50 U.S. states. More sophisticated offset presses, he said, can change the bills’ serial numbers during the press run, to make them seem more authentic.

President Lincoln signed the legislation that created the Secret Service, Thomas said, on April 14, 1865, just hours before he was assassinated at Ford’s Theatre. At the time of the Civil War, counterfeits accounted for 30%-35% of the money circulating, and combatting that was “the sole purpose” for the agency’s creation, he said.

And combatting financial crime remains a key element of the Secret Service’s assignment. Nowadays, that’s grown to include things like credit card and bank fraud and cybercrimes for financial gain, Thomas said.

The Secret Service didn’t begin protecting presidents until 1901, after President McKinley was murdered. Decades too late for Honest Abe. ■



# 9 businesses clear 1st hurdle to legacy status

8 neighborhoods are represented in initial batch under new law

By JONATHAN NEWMAN

**M**ORE THAN A YEAR after the Board of Supervisors directed the city's Office of Small Business to establish a registry of legacy businesses in San Francisco — longstanding community-serving businesses valuable for their cultural assets — the first nine candidates for legacy status saw their applications win the unanimous approval of the Historic Preservation Commission on July 20.

Next and final stop: a public hearing before the Small Business Commission on Aug. 8.

Collectively, the nine have racked up nearly 400 years of business activity in San Francisco.

The rollout of the registry has been frustratingly slow, developing the bureaucratic guidelines for applicants and the standards for determining how and when a business earns the right to receive promotional and marketing assistance and, most importantly, financial grants from the city remain unsettled.

Voters in November approved Measure J, creating the Legacy Business Historic Preservation Fund, a means to channel money to qualifying legacy businesses and their landlords. The mayor's office allocated \$2.5 million to the fund in April.

Legacy business status opens the path to receiving a yearly grant of up to \$500 per full-time employee and, for landlords willing to extend leases of 10 or more years to the business, an annual stipend of up to \$22,500.

The Office of Small Business — with a major new program suddenly thrust upon its already busy staff — struggled to process legacy applications and develop the underpinnings of a legacy promotion program until May when the supervisors added \$306,250 to the office budget.

Two of the initial nine applicants are nonprofits: Community Boards, a



JONATHAN NEWMAN

**Lone Star Saloon:** The building housing this SoMa oasis at 1354 Harrison St. that serves “working-class gay men” was sold recently. The saloon owner hopes legacy status will give him some needed bargaining power with the new landlord. Grants to landlords willing to extend leases of 10 or more years to legacy businesses could reach an annual amount of \$22,500 each.

40-year-old, citywide public conflict resolution center now housed on Van Ness Avenue, two blocks from City Hall; and Precita Eyes, the Mission District's pioneering mural arts organization on 24th Street established in 1977.

Two are bars: Specs' Twelve Adler Museum Cafe in North Beach, family-owned and -operated since 1968, and Lone Star Saloon on Harrison Street, the only nominee in District 6 in the first batch.

Three are restaurants: Pacific Cafe, in business in the outer Richmond since 1974; Haight Street's Two Jack's Nik's Place Seafood, opened in 1977 by the current owner Nikki Cooper's parents; and Toy Boat Dessert Cafe on Clement

Street, established in 1982.

Gilman's Kitchens and Baths, which has served the Bayview community for 62 years, and Macchiarini Creative Design and Metalworks, a 68-year-old art and jewelry design house on Grant Avenue, complete the first official roster of legacy businesses in San Francisco.

Richard Kurylo, the newly appointed Legacy Business program manager, shepherded the nine in their presentations before the commission, highlighting the “generously portioned” meals served at Pacific Cafe, the monthly “throwback night” when Two Jack's Nik's Place Seafood charges 1977 prices, the treasures of memorabilia on display at Toy Boat Dessert Cafe and Specs' Twelve Adler Museum Cafe, the oldest private museum in the city, and the oasis for “working-class gay men” provided by Lone Star Saloon.

The Small Business Commission must now determine if each of the nine businesses has operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in operations exceeding two years, or more than 20 years if the business is in danger of displacement, as is the case with Lone Star Saloon, whose building was recently sold.

The commission must also determine whether the business has significantly contributed to the history of its neighborhood and is committed to maintaining its appearance and the traditions that have defined it in the past.

Community Boards opened for business in 1976 when the neighborhood movement was booming. It claims status as the oldest-running public conflict resolution center in the country. Forty years ago, when rents were cheaper, Community Boards maintained nine small offices throughout the city, a network of sites where neighbors met in mediation to resolve common problems. Now, it operates from one location in Opera Plaza, staffed by one full-time employee, three part-time workers, a rotating handful of temporary interns and a volunteer army of nearly 400 trained mediators, translators and facilitators.

Community Boards has lost two leases in the past 14 years. Communications Director Jim Garrison tells the

story: “We were at Market and Van Ness Avenue when our rent doubled in the first dot-com boom. Then, we moved to 24th Street at Folsom and fell victim to the Google bus pressure. We watched the corner taqueria close and, again, saw our rent doubled. For us, the possible yearly grant for our one full-time employee isn't significant, but we hope the legacy recognition will convince our landlord to extend our lease for 10 years beyond its end next year.”

Kurylo cautions that grant guidelines for businesses and landlords are still in development and notes that any legacy business or landlord must be free from delinquent taxes, fines, penalties, interest, assessments or fees owed to the city before receiving grant money.

Despite the slow start of the legacy program, Kurylo has another 10 businesses ready to go before the Historic Preservation Commission on Aug. 3, including two in District 6 — SF Party on Post Street, the three-story emporium of all the bells, whistles and novelties needed for a proper celebration, which traces its ancestry to 1901; and Image Conscious, a 36-year-old publisher and distributor of fine arts posters, now on Tenth Street.

“My goal is to get 50 more applications passed on to HPC by year's end in addition to the 19 now working their way through the process,” Kurylo said.

The legacy business ordinance caps the number of legacy status approvals at 300 in any fiscal year, so there's plenty of room for more before June 30, 2017. ■

## ERRATUM

In the July issue, The Extra misstated that the 63 nominations before the Office of Small Business were applications. Also, misstated that legacy status is restricted to businesses with 100 or fewer employees. The employee limit applies to the maximum grant an enterprise could receive once recognized by the registry. ■

CENTRAL CITY  
**EXTRA**

NEWS IS A COMMUNITY SERVICE  
SAN FRANCISCO

**CENTRAL CITY EXTRA** is published monthly by the nonprofit San Francisco Study Center Inc., serving the community since 1972. The Extra was initiated through grants from the S.F. Hotel Tax Fund and the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund. The contents are copyrighted by the San Francisco Study Center, 1663 Mission Street, Suite 310, San Francisco, CA 94103.

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**ONLINE PARTNER:** Hoodline

CENTRAL CITY EXTRA is a member of the  
SAN FRANCISCO NEIGHBORHOOD NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION,  
SOCIETY OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS, NORTHERN CALIFORNIA CHAPTER,  
AND SAN FRANCISCO/PENINSULA PRESS CLUB



# Eritrean American: 'I stay busy, pay the rent'

▶ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

down in the streets by the Ethiopian army. Abraham's three brothers eventually were all killed.

"There is a spirit in Eritrea that we will never be put down, even if poor," Abraham says. Eritreans bounce back, pitch in, and work hard.

It's a nostalgia, if not a romanticism, that many residents of the unusually diverse Curran House hold dear for their own native, war-torn countries that are often still in conflicts.

What makes Abraham's story unusual, however, is his criminal record, stint in a deportation center, and successful rehabilitation and recovery.

About 20 different nationalities live in the modern, 67-unit, truly affordable apartment building that TNDC built in the middle of the Tenderloin in 2005. A pioneer in affordable family housing, Curran House has the most diversity at a single address anywhere in the neighborhood, which is also the city's poorest.

Abraham's best friend, Kesete Abaha, a 53-year-old Oakland truck driver who left Eritrea in 1987, calls him "a nice guy, an honest guy. He likes to talk about the history of Eritrea. I like him. But he had a very tough time."

## ERRATUM

In this story, The Extra states it was forbidden in Eritrea to have a satellite dish. A U.S. State Department report said the government does allow them, they're able to pick up major U.S. networks, and they are spreading throughout the country.

Since settling in San Francisco 28 years ago, Abraham made mistakes he paid for early on. Then his financial highs and lows seemed to stabilize in 2007 when a friend suggested he drive for Yellow Cab. Working five days a week he made decent money. But now he drives just twice a week, a casualty of the squeeze from Uber and Lyft.

"I've had better jobs," he says. "But being unemployed for a while changed my mood. I stay busy, pay the rent. It's better than nothing. Be your own boss. I like that."

Sundays, he may go to Christian churches in Oakland (Eritrea is about equal parts Christian and Muslim). Or he's in his third-floor room watching the

Eritrean television channel. There's just one, government-controlled, as are the two radio networks.

At Curran House, he is yet another resident who is openly friendly, gets along, goes his own way — and has no friends there.

"No friends come to my house," Abraham says of his small studio. There's a bed, chair and a stool, a towel spread for his kitchen tablecloth, and on shelving a commemorative plate of President Obama and pictures of Abraham's family. An Ethiopian man lives in Curran House, too. "I say hi. He's a nice guy." If a Filipino celebration is downstairs, he says, and everyone is speaking Tagalog, he'll say hello and walk on by.

Abraham doesn't linger in the neighborhood, either. "I never go anywhere in the Tenderloin. And I go straight to my room to sleep. I have no problem. Curran House is good. No bad people. Many nationalities. I have no problem with that."

Eritrea is the core of his universe, the heartland of his social orbit. To hang out, he'll hop in his 2005 Lexus, which a cousin chipped in for the down payment, and drive out to the Fillmore Coffee Shop at Fillmore and Eddy that is owned by an Eritrean.

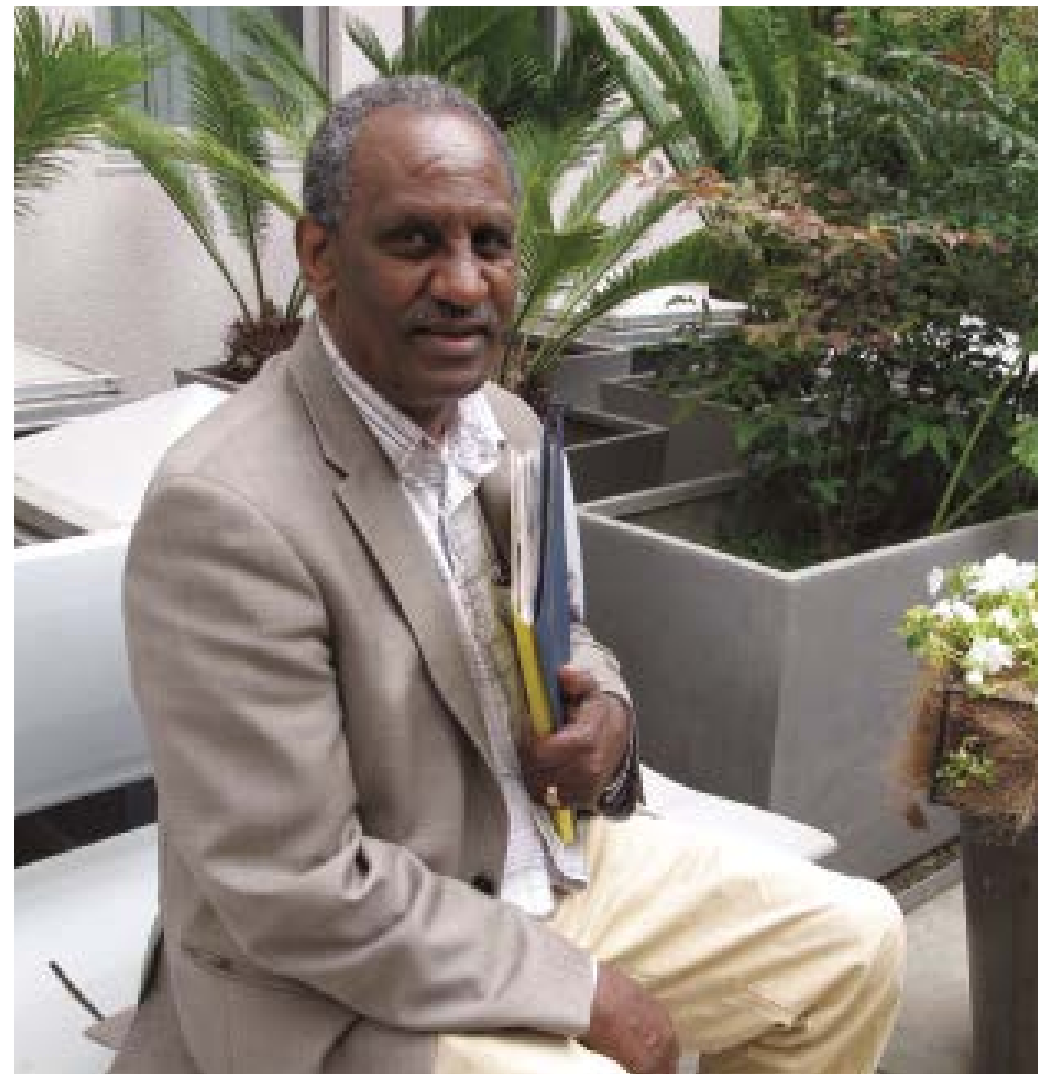
Abraham is among the few Tenderloin residents with a car. He parks it in a nearby lot for \$220 a month.

He also frequents the Eritrean Community Center, just two blocks down Fillmore from the coffee shop, a sparse room the size of a large patio, open at 6 p.m. for a couple of hours on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Countrymen in dark shirts and sport coats sit around the perimeter, their palaver like farm talk around a cracker barrel. For parties, they'll rent a larger room.

It's there that Abraham learned about the Eritrean Community Center at 955 Grand Ave. in Oakland, and soon became a dues-paying regular and avid volunteer.

The community bought the one-story, 18,000-square-foot building two years ago. "Every Eritrean in the Bay Area gave money to buy that house — very important," Abraham emphasizes. "It's like a club." He pays \$10 monthly dues and visits twice a week to hang out, meet people, gossip, help with chores and talk politics. "If I get sick, I need help. I consider them my friends and family."

Working in shifts, Abraham and scores of volunteers this year painted



the exterior yellow. Come Aug. 5-7, it will house the annual three-day Western Eritrean Festival that locals flock to, most speaking Tigrinya, one of Eritrea's nine languages. Countrymen come to Oakland from all over the U.S. and Europe, too, celebrating their culture. More than 5,000 attend.

But in the times of Abraham's desperate hours in the early 1990s, before he connected to a trove of Eritrean compatriots, a range of other people gave him a hand, from defense lawyers, to convicts, to clergy and social workers.

"When I first came to San Francisco, I met the wrong people in the wrong place (in the Tenderloin)."

His downward spiral began in 1990, two years after arriving in San Francisco when he was living in the Jefferson

Hotel at 440 Eddy St. He knocked on his neighbor's door. On the other side of the door were plainclothes cops who'd had his neighbor, who was on probation, under surveillance. As Abraham tells it, he had 14 grams of cocaine on him and a wad of cash.

"They open the door and say I am delivering. They arrest me for having cocaine for sale, manufacturing it and transporting it — three counts. I say, no, I am a user."

His public defender pressured him to take a three- to five-year prison "deal," or the sentence could be longer. Abraham said no. Possession yes, but the other charges "weren't true" and couldn't be proved, he insisted. He wanted a jury trial.

▶ CONTINUED ON PAGE 6



Abraham Weldeselasia, above left, holds a sheaf of records in the Curran House courtyard. He has pay stubs from his work on Pier 70 and keeps in his wallet the wilted business card of Brendan P. Conroy, now a Superior Court judge, who as a defense attorney helped Abraham get a better deal in his conviction for cocaine. Aleem Gihere, above at right, chats about old times with Abraham in the Fillmore Coffee Shop. They met in the 1970s working in the Port of Sudan when Abraham was a young man trying to get to America.



## Escape to America — East African teen takes 12 years to realize his dream



ILLUSTRATION: LISE STAMPELI

ABRAHAM Weldeselasia's dream as a teenager in the poor East African country of Eritrea was to stow away on a ship and some way get to the U.S. He failed the first time, not the second, though it took almost a dozen years.

He wasn't much for school and dropped out in the sixth grade. He had friends 18 and 19 who had completed 12 school years "and could have been teachers," but they "sat all day in cafes smoking cigarettes." Not him. He wanted work. Jobs were scarce, pay low. Current per capita income is \$1,200 annually.

He lived with his parents in Asmara, the 7,600-foot-high capital that was destined for danger in Eritrea's decades long war of independence from the larger, adjacent and equally poor Ethiopia. Abraham's young eyes were on Massawa, a small port on the Red Sea 41 miles east, down the mountainous road that takes a bus an hour and 40 minutes to reach. There, he could land a job on a boat, hide out when it debarked, maybe become a

merchant marine, eventually make it to New York.

"It came into my mind, I can't get rich, I can't get married. I decided to go to Massawa." He was 16. Leaving home was bold. Eritrean family life is close and everyone tries to work. Things are expensive. "Oh, I fell in love when I saw it (Massawa). Beautiful. The seaport. The sea. You could swim there. I wanted to be merchant marine."

At home his parents were alarmed. Family cohesion was torn. Soon his father went to Massawa with a bus ticket for him. "I come to take you home," his father said. "It's shame. Your mother cannot sleep. You don't want to live by yourself and be a street boy."

But Abraham ducked out of the bus station and his father rode home alone. Abraham laughs quietly at it now.

His first stowaway attempt came after he and 25 others had worked for a month day and night unloading a Greek ship filled with American grain, a gift to the starving population. He knew the ship like the back of his hand. When it departed, he and a buddy hid, and after two days, too far to turn back, they figured, they emerged saying they fell asleep but now could work their way going forward.

"Going to America!" Abraham's eyes still light up telling it.

But the ship had actually headed south near the Red Sea port of Assab, and nobody was happy with the two. On shore, a judge sentenced them to 30 days in jail or pay \$30. Luckily, Abraham had a well-to-do cousin living there who paid the fine and offered to find him a job. But he turned it down. Assab weather was too hot. He took a bus home.

"I thought my life would be in Massawa, a contractor working in supply and cleaning ships."

At home, he got a job in a sweater factory. Workers were paid 60 cents for each sweater they made on a machine. Fast ones made 12 a day. After learning the machine, Abraham could make six. "Small pay, but good (steady) money," he says. "I did it for a year." His father wouldn't take any money for his living at home. "But Massawa was still in my head. One day I think I'll get a ship."

Back he went. After six months, his mother came to get him. "The port isn't that big. You can find anyone in half an hour. She said, 'If you don't come back, I will walk into the Red Sea and never come out.' She touch my heart."

So he returned, knowing she wouldn't have done

that but afraid "she like me no more." He took a job in the bakery where both parents worked, delivering 200 kilos of bread a day on a bicycle, not the motorcycle he was promised.

But the war with Ethiopia was heating up. Young men were aggressively conscripted and people were being shot down in Asmara's streets. His father forged a travel document for him. "Go," his father said to him, "I don't want to see you dead at my door." Even so, his three brothers were later killed in the war.

His second stowaway was on an Italian boat with a Panamanian flag, allowing it to hire non-Italians. It got him to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

"So many ships it look like a (floating) city! So I came out of hiding to see if I could get a job. I told them I was here to save my life."

They said he could stay. Then, working on ship, he traveled around northern East Africa earning a seaman's book until stopping in 1977 again in Jeddah. There, he was given the option of staying and working on land. He found an assistant plant operator job in the big desalination plant. After three years, "They want to give me more responsibility," and made him senior operator, which included doing the two-hour plant startup, adjusting flows

and maintaining controls. "Best job ever. They love me."

He had a free furnished apartment, reimbursed transportation, paid vacation and a \$1,500 monthly salary (5,000 reals). He had the job six years. It went sour when a Scottish management company hired a British engineer as Abraham's boss. The plant developed a common problem Abraham knew how to fix without the high cost of shutting the plant down, but the know-it-all engineer wouldn't listen. The upshot was Abraham was fired for insubordination. "I do nothing to this guy."

It was around 1987, a time when a lot of people were leaving Arabia for other jobs in other countries. He went to Athens. After his 12 years of traveling, his passport was used up and he went to the American Embassy saying he was a political refugee who couldn't go back to Eritrea. "If I go back, it is death. I am stateless. I seek to settle in America."

After consideration, the embassy said "the evidence" was there, and he got his wish. He received a passport from the United Nations in Athens. He arrived in New York in 1988, three years before the Ethiopian-Eritrean war ended, came to Oakland, which he didn't like, then went to San Francisco, which he loved at once. ■

— Tom Carter



# Eritrean American realizes his dream living in Tenderloin

► CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

He asked for and got another lawyer, Brendan P. Conroy. By that time, Abraham had already spent 2½ months in jail. “Don’t panic, keep the faith, he tell me,” Conroy said that with a costly city trial he’d lose. Instead, he’d meet with the first lawyer and the judge and try to forge a better agreement. He succeeded.

(Conroy is now a San Francisco Superior Court judge appointed by Gov. Jerry Brown in December 2012 to fill a retirement vacancy.)

Abraham got three months, minus time served. He was out in two weeks, so grateful, but pinned to three years probation and a felon forever. Abraham, 26 years later, still keeps Conroy’s now limp and frayed business card in his wallet.

“I don’t want immigration to come and get me, I tell Conroy. It was (already) the worst time of my life. But I never forget him.”

## BEEF OVER WALKMAN

On a TL street in another wrong-place-wrong-time incident more than a year later, Abraham was in an argument over the price of a Walkman another man was selling. They had agreed on \$20, Abraham said, and now the man wanted \$30, and was yelling when a motorcycle cop stopped to check it out and ran their IDs.

Finding that Abraham was a felon, the cop handcuffed him and hauled both men into jail. In court, Abraham told the hearing judge that he had witnesses to vouch for the \$20 agreement. He produced them, and “the judge threw the case out.” But viewing the heavy convictions, the judge says “he’s revoking my probation.” Devastated, Abraham was taken to San Quentin in handcuffs to serve two years.

“Amazing,” he says, still stunned.

In San Quentin, he stayed at “the ranch,” a dormitory-style prison for low-end criminals. He learned to operate a forklift and made \$1.06 a day. His time was shortened to six months. At a halfway house on Indiana Street in San Francisco, he had to choose a job and create the mandatory bank account. He said he worked in a Goodwill store.

With 1½ months to go, two immigration officials came to the halfway house and told Abraham there had been a mistake. “They take me back to San Quentin,” he said. “I was sad, very sad.”

He was released after six months. But immigration officers were at the gate waiting to take him into custody. That detention lasted 22 more months, into

1994. He was bused to a detention center in Yuba City, from which he was shuttled back and forth to the federal Immigration Court at 630 Sansome St. where eventually a judge told him, “You’re excluded from the U.S.” and ordered that he be returned to Athens where his U.N. passport was issued.

He was taken to the Oakland airport and put on a plane “with many Latins,” thinking he was being deported. But the flight was surprisingly short. The plane landed in Kern County where a deputy sheriff was waiting.

“They didn’t tell me this,” Abraham says. “But I was so happy not to be deported. I was talking to God,” cementing his good fortune and laughing through tears.

Still, he languished in the Mesa Verde Detention Facility for months wondering why authorities were ignoring him, and started thinking that maybe he’d never get out.

“This taxed my mind, oh Lord. But there are so many knowledgeable people in custody. And I go to the library every day, 9 to 11 a.m.”

An “L.A. homeboy” schooled him, encouraged him to write letters to a phalanx of top officials. So Abraham created a nine-page letter describing his case and the “fabricated charges,” asking why he couldn’t get bailed out. He mailed it to 10 in all, starting with President Bill Clinton and Attorney General Janet Reno and also to Amnesty International and the International Red Cross in Switzerland.

One replied.

“A week later I get letter from Red Cross,” he said. “They say they appreciate my letter and will help me any way they can. They will work for me, be my right hand.”

Abraham says his jailers read all correspondence and, perhaps it was just coincidence, but a week later immigration officials met with him. He says they told him it cost \$63 a day to keep him there, and that he could get bailed out for \$5,000.

## REHAB HOUSE IN BAYVIEW

It was good to finally get noticed, but the price stunned Abraham. Where could he touch money like that? A few weeks later, he said, the cost was knocked down to \$1,000.

A minister, Bishop George Lee, had regularly visited the San Francisco jail when Abraham was there. He told inmates about support available at his storefront Shiloh Full Gospel Church on Third Street with its rehab house on the



FESTIVAL POSTER

**The Eritrean Community Center in Oakland, one of the oldest Eritrean community centers in the United States, hosts an annual festival that draws 5,000 people from around the U.S. It features music, food, sports and seminars.**

second floor. Lee started it in 1988 and reportedly helped hundreds of people. Abraham called him.

Lee and three others from his congregation came up with \$1,000 and freed Abraham. He had restrictions, though. He couldn’t leave the country. He had to enter a drug program. He had to report to Immigration monthly, a condition eventually reduced to once a year, and pay \$380 a year to the Immigration and Naturalization Service for work authorization. And when the INS released Abraham in 1995, he went to live at Shiloh, staying there for 18 months. He had gotten a job at the San Francisco shipyard, Pier 70. He joined the Machinists Union, Local 1414 in San Mateo, making \$22.50 an hour. “Good money. Overtime, big checks.”

But Lee, who had extended other help to Abraham, such as once furnishing out-of-town transportation to visit a relative, has been lost. His church burned down in 2011, displacing 23 men. The Extra couldn’t locate him in the Bayview.

INS sent Abraham to a six-month program at Walden House where he was required to have a job. His heart raced when he saw that on its job list was dismantling retired ships for scrap at the old S.F. Naval Shipyard. He was a shoo-in because of his range of work on ships on the Red Sea. When his success was announced before 120 people at a Walden House meeting, he said they all stood and applauded.

“They loved me.”

Eventually, the dock work dried up and he was just getting sporadic work. He ended up at the Dalt Hotel, an SRO at 34 Turk St. The bathroom down the hall became difficult. Abraham had a medical condition that had him traipsing to it four times a night. He told Monique, the social worker, about it, and with a phone call she found the one studio with a bathroom left at Curran House. Abraham, grateful still for the prize, moved in. That year, 2007, he became a Yellow Cab driver.

## ‘A VERY HARD WORKER’

Late on a June afternoon, the sun low and golden in the Fillmore District, Abraham walks up to the Fillmore cafe and shakes hands with an Eritrean man at an outside table, goes inside, shakes another hand and continues to the back where three men sit over their coffee. They all greet him, me, too, and we sit. The closest, Alem Gihere, first met Abraham 42 years ago in the sweltering Port of Sudan where he worked on the pier and Abraham on an Italian ship.

What can you say about Abraham? I ask Alem. He peers over his glasses and says, “A very hard worker.”

They’ll all go to the community festival in Oakland, Kesete Abraha and Mathios Joannes, also, a gathering of the Eritrean diaspora with songs and dancing and East African culinary excellence. And from scores of vendors they’ll pick over T-shirts, CDs, DVDs and traditional attire. It’s not to be missed. ■

# KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

**San Francisco Mental Health Clients’ Rights Advocates** informs, supports and helps people receiving mental health services or those who need help or advice about their rights by listening to people’s concerns and needs and advocating for their legal rights.

If you’re being treated for a mental disorder, voluntarily or involuntarily, you have the same legal rights and responsibilities that the U.S. Constitution and California laws guarantee to all other persons.

## Contact us:

(415) 552-8100 (800) 729-7727 Fax: (415) 552-8109

**San Francisco Mental Health Clients’ Rights Advocates**  
1663 Mission Street, Suite 310



**T. CHRISTOPHER EDWARDS**  
**'A joyful man'**

The death of Christopher Edwards at age 58 on June 19 was still reverberating through the Alder Hotel on Sixth Street almost a month later, when co-minister Kathryn L. Benton presided over a rescheduled memorial service for him.

There were about a dozen people who this time got there in time, on July 14. The memorial, originally set for July 1, had been rescheduled, Benton said, because no one had showed. The first of the month is always a busy time in SROs, of course, but perhaps it was simply a matter of the word not having gotten out.

Because even when this memorial had concluded, the sight of Mr. Edwards' smiling face, beaming from a picture frame on a table in the community room, surrounded by five white candles and four vases of irises and tiger lilies, shocked one man who wandered into the high-ceilinged community room as things were wrapping up.

"I just talked to him a couple of weeks ago!" he said.

Others were more resigned. "He knew he was going," a man who identified himself as Frank had said earlier. "He knew it was coming. He said, 'I know. I'm gonna do it my way.'"

"He became a nice person. He was still Chris," Frank said as a chuckle rolled through the others gathered there. "Those of you who knew him know what I mean. But he had peace in the end."

"We were both chefs," said Diane, who brought a yellow rose to the memorial and laid it on the table as she spoke. "We did a lot of cooking together. He was a joyful man, a good person, a nice person."

Diane arrived after the memorial had begun; she'd been upstairs cook-



COURTESY ALDER HOTEL

ing, and when things had concluded, brought a plate of chicken and fixings out for everyone to share.

"He's gonna come knocking at my door in about 10 minutes!" Sheryl said. "He's like a brother to me. We went to school together. He had a sister having problems, he had to go back and forth. He was always a pest, but all in all, he was a good person. I will miss him. I consider him a brother." She spoke of how Mr. Edwards would, at times, be seen with one phone in his hand, another in his pocket attached to an earpiece, and be conducting conversations on both of them, and with someone in person, all at the same time.

Someone else said she suspected he was keeping about five home care social workers busy at once, too.

One of the two flyers on the table with Mr. Edwards' photo quoted a poem by Louise Bailey. The other had a statement by Alder manager Sajid Shabber, along with lines attributed to Maya Angelou about how people will forget what you said and did, but never how you made them feel.

"Christopher Edwards was a kind man that lived in unit 303 ... he always showed me a lot of respect," Shabber

had written. "He was one who had an awesome personality. ... He would come to my office to express his obligations, joy and fears with a smile."

Shabber attended the memorial, too. "He'd come by my office every day," he said. "Most of the time it was about his overnight violations. He'd take it to the edge and bring it right back."

"He was always positive toward me," said a man named Lewis, a near neighbor of Mr. Edwards on the hotel's third floor. "I saw the friendship he had with Tyrone. That was a special bond. We all need that."

Tyrone had sat in the front row of the two arrays of chairs, seemingly too broke up to speak. Toward the end of the memorial, though, he addressed the photo: "Hey big brother, I love you, I miss you. May you rest in peace."

"Chris always shined," said a young man named Max, who was present with his little Chihuahua mix Lucy. "He'd quote 'I Love Lucy' whenever he'd see us: 'Lucy, you got some 'splainin' to do!'"

"He was really doing something for himself. Not a lot of people here take care of themselves that much. I'm not a very social person, but Chris was one of the people I'd always say hi to, have short conversations with." ■

— Mark Hedlin

**JAMES SCHELKE**  
**'A real gentleman'**

James Schelske died July 8 at his residence in the Bishop Swing Community House on Tenth Street. He was 50.

A memorial for Mr. Schelske was held there July 18.

In a room filled with light from a

wall of glass, Kathryn Benton, minister with Episcopal Community Services, stood before a small table on which a vase of roses and mums sat alongside a framed photograph of Mr. Schelske. She reminded an assembled group of 10 of his neighbors that "Our journey — James' journey — connects us all in the stream of life and death."

Mr. Schelske moved into Community House, a home for 134 formerly homeless men and women, in December. His neighbors knew very little about him.

Juanita Kolacia met Mr. Schelske several years ago. "We were waiting in line for shelter at the Multi-Service Center one late afternoon. He introduced himself and we talked. He always remembered me whenever we'd met in passing on the streets," Kolacia said. "I was happy when I saw he moved here. We laughed and he promised to have me over for dinner, but it didn't happen. He was a real gentleman," she added.

"He was always very friendly, very kind and genuine," Lisa Wheeler said.

Benton passed a small box filled with inspirational thoughts printed on paper slips among the assembled, inviting them to select one at random and share the message. "Structure your day. A productive schedule keeps you on track and connected to the world," someone read aloud.

In closing, Wheeler and Ralph Reyes led the group through several choruses of the simple hymn "Amen," softly singing as clapping hands quietly kept the beat. ■

— Jonathan Newman

OBITUARIES



**Would you like a friend or relative who has passed away to be remembered in the Central City Extra?**

We have written and published hundreds of obituaries for central city residents after attending their memorials at the invitation of officiants. Usually held at the SROs where the deceased lived, the memorials are where our reporters talk with neighbors, friends and relatives, and, until recently, with SRO staff.

From what's shared there and from followup interviews, we write the obituaries that honor the lives of Tenderloin and South of Market residents. Photos from some of those obituaries are pictured above.

But because of federal privacy laws and the city's more stringent interpretation of them, The Extra is being invited to fewer and fewer memorials. Without the focus of those gatherings, it's becoming increasingly difficult to continue to write the obituaries.

If you would like to share information about someone who has passed, contact Marjorie Beggs, senior writer and editor, at marjorie@studycenter.org or 415-626-1650. A reporter will contact you to set up an interview time. Please: no anonymous interviews. We always appreciate photos to accompany the obituaries.



**SOFT STORY PROPERTY OWNERS: Your permit application is DUE!**

If you are a property owner of a multi-unit building with 3-stories, 15+ units, your permit application is due by **September 15, 2016**, which is less than 45 days away.

Turn in your permit application to DBI by September 15 to avoid getting this placard and a Notice of Violation on your property.

Find out if your property is on the list by visiting [sfdbi.org/soft-story-properties-list](http://sfdbi.org/soft-story-properties-list).



DBI | Protecting Building and Life Safety

@sfdbi

**HOUSING APPLICATIONS ARE BEING ACCEPTED FOR THE KNOX AND BAYANIHAN HOUSE**



The Knox



Bayanihan House

Please go to 241 6th Street, San Francisco, CA for applications

**The TODCO Single Room Occupancy (SRO) Housing Waiting List is open** for the Knox and the Bayanihan House. If your name is currently on any TODCO Housing Waiting List and you would like information on your current status, please call the TODCO Marketing Office at 415-957-0227 on Fridays only.

Building	Size & Amenities	Max/Min Household Income Limits	Rent as of Feb. 1, 2015
<b>The Knox SRO</b> located at 241- 6th St. & Tehama is accepting applications and has an <b>OPEN WAITLIST</b>	<b>SRO – 1 Person or Couple</b> Room size: 10 ½ x 18 (Semi-Private) bathroom 7 x 7 Unit amenities: sink, microwave, refrigerator, 2-burner stove, closet, single bed Building amenities: small gym, library, private lounge, roof top garden, community kitchen, laundry facility, 24 hour staff & surveillance	1 person \$34,600/year 2 person \$39,520/year Minimum income of \$1,374/month	Move-in deposit \$687 Monthly rent \$687 plus utilities
<b>Hotel Isabel</b> located at 1095 Mission <b>CLOSED WAITLIST</b>	<b>SRO – 1 Person</b> Shared bathroom Unit amenities: sink, microwave, refrigerator, 2- burner stove, closet and single bed	1 person \$34,600/year No minimum income Closed	30% OF INCOME Requires a Certificate of Homelessness
<b>Bayanihan House</b> (Non-assisted units) located at 88 – 6th St. & Mission. <b>OPEN WAITLIST</b>	<b>SRO – 1 Person or Couple</b> Room single: 10½ x 12, shared bathroom Double occupancy: 12x12, shared bathroom Unit amenities: sink, microwave, refrigerator, 2-burner stove, closet, single bed Building amenities: community kitchen, 24 hour staff & surveillance, laundry facility	1 person \$30,275/year Couple \$34,580/year Minimum income of \$889.40/month	As of Jan. 1, 2015 Move-in deposit \$607 Monthly rent \$607 Utilities included

TDD: (415) 345-4470





# COMMUNITY CALENDAR

## SPECIAL EVENTS

**Main Library lectures**, Koret Auditorium: Safe and effective use of medical marijuana, Aug. 9, 6-7:30 p.m., Dr. Laurie Vollen. Is nuclear disarmament achievable? Aug. 13, at 2 p.m., Dr. Helen Caldicott, author of more than a dozen books about the dangers of nuclear power. Foods that promote healing and vitality, Aug. 16, 6 p.m., KJ Landis, author of "Superior Self: Reaching Superior Health for a Superior Self." Book sale and signing follows the program. Info: [sfpl.org](http://sfpl.org).

**"Peaceable Kingdom: The Journey Home,"** Aug. 20, 2-5 p.m., Main Library, Koret Auditorium. Award-winning documentary film explores the struggle of conscience of farmers raising animals. RSVP <http://tinyurl.com/zwdmsv3>.

## ARTS EVENTS

**The Awakening**, adaptation of the groundbreaking feminist novel by Kate Chopin, through Aug. 20. Presented by Breadbox Theatre Company, adapted by Oren Stevens and directed by Ariel Craft, at EXIT Stage Left, 156 Eddy St. Tickets: [breadboxtheatre.org](http://breadboxtheatre.org).

**BAART annual art show and open house**, Aug. 11, 8-11 a.m. and noon-2:30 p.m., 433 Turk St. Art by clients of this 35-year-old drug treatment and rehabilitation program.

**People in Plazas** Free music at Mint Plaza, 12:30-1:30: Aug. 11, Citizen Funk; Aug. 18, Vega! (Latin); Aug. 25, JimBo Trout (Americana). Civic Center Plaza, noon-1 p.m.: Aug. 24, Andre Theiry (Zydeco); Aug. 31,

Charlie Barreda SF Latin Jazz. Info: [peopleinplazas.org](http://peopleinplazas.org).

## REGULAR SCHEDULE

### HOUSING

**Tenant Associations Coalition of San Francisco**, 1st Wednesday of each month, noon, 201 Turk St., Community Room. Contact Michael Nulty, 339-8327. Resident unity, leadership training.

### HEALTH AND MENTAL HEALTH

**CBHS Client Council**, 3rd Tuesday of month, 3-5 p.m., 1380 Howard, Room 515. Consumer advisers from self-help groups and mental health consumer advocates. Public welcome. Info: 255-3695. Call ahead as meeting location may change.

**Healthcare Action Team**, 2nd Wednesday of month, 1010 Mission St., Bayanihan Community Center, 11 a.m.-12:30 p.m. Focus on increasing supportive home services, expanded eligibility for home care, improved discharge planning. Light lunch. Call Ligia Montano, 546-1333 x315.

**Hoarding and Cluttering Support Groups**, weekly meetings at various times, conducted by Mental Health Association of San Francisco, 870 Market St., Suite 928. Info: 421-2926 or [mentalhealthsf.org/group-search](http://mentalhealthsf.org/group-search).

**Legal clinic**, 4th Thursday of the month, 507 Polk St., 10 a.m.-noon. Legal help for people with psychiatric or developmental disabilities who need help with an SSA work review, sponsored by People with Disabilities Foundation. Sliding-scale fee. By appointment only:



LEIF KARLSTROM

**JimBo Trout & the Fishpeople**, a 25-year-old "bluegrassish" band, performs at Mint Plaza Aug. 25 as part of People in Plazas' free music series.

931-3070. Info: [pwdf.org](http://pwdf.org).

**Mental Health Board**, 3rd Wednesday of the month, 6:30-8:30 p.m., City Hall, room 278. CBHS advisory committee, open to the public. Call: 255-3474.

**Tenderloin Healthy Corner Store Coalition**, 4th Thursday, 3 p.m., Kelly Cullen Community Building, 220 Golden Gate Ave., 2nd floor auditorium or 5th

floor gym. Public invited to discuss legislation that encourages corner stores to sell fresh food and reduce tobacco and alcohol sales. Info: Jessica Estrada, [jessica.healthyretail@gmail.com](mailto:jessica.healthyretail@gmail.com), 581-2483.

## SAFETY

**SoMa Police Community Relations Forum**, 4th Monday of each month, 6-7:30 p.m. Location varies. To receive monthly email info: 538-8100 x202.

**Tenderloin Police Station Community Meeting**, last Tuesday of month, 6 p.m., police station community room, 301 Eddy St. Call Susa Black, 345-7300.

## NEIGHBORHOOD IMPROVEMENT

**Alliance for a Better District 6**, 2nd Tuesday of month, 6 p.m., 230 Eddy St. Contact Michael Nulty, 820-1560 or [sf\\_district6@yahoo.com](mailto:sf_district6@yahoo.com), a districtwide improvement association.

**Central Market Community Benefit District**, board meets 2nd Tuesday of month, Hotel Whitcomb, 1231 Market St., 3 p.m. Info: 882-3088, <http://central-market.org>.

**Friends of Boeddeker Park**, 3rd Thursday of the month, 3:30 p.m., park clubhouse, Eddy and Jones. Info: Betty Traynor, 931-1126.

**Gene Friend Recreation Center Advisory Board**, 3rd Thursday of month, 5 p.m. Works to protect SoMa resources for all residents. Gene Friend Rec Center, 270 Sixth St. Info: Tim Figueras, 554-9532.

**Tenderloin Community Benefit District**, Full board meets 3rd Monday at 5 p.m., 55 Taylor St. Info: 292-4812.

**Safe Haven Project**, 4th Tuesday of month, 3 p.m., 519 Ellis St. (Senator Hotel). Contact: 563-3205, x115, or [centralcitysafehaven@gmail.com](mailto:centralcitysafehaven@gmail.com).

**SoMa Community Stabilization Fund Advisory Committee**, 3rd Thursday of month, 5:30 p.m., 1 South Van Ness, 2nd floor. Info: Claudine del Rosario, 701-5580.

## SENIORS AND DISABLED

**Mayor's Disability Council**, 3rd Friday of month, 1-3 p.m., City Hall, room 400. Call: 554-6789. Open to the public.

**Senior & Disability Action** (formerly Planning for Elders/Senior Action Network), general meeting, 2nd Thursday of month, 9 a.m.-noon, Universal Unitarian Church, 1187 Franklin St. SDA

**Housing Collaborative** meeting, 3rd Wednesday, 1 p.m. HealthCare Action Team meeting, 2nd Wednesday, 1010 Mission St., (Bayanihan Community Center). For info about SDA's Survival School, University and computer class schedules: 546-1333, [www.sdaction.org](http://www.sdaction.org).

## DISTRICT 6 SUPERVISOR

**Jane Kim**, chair, Public Safety and Neighborhood Services Committee, Transbay Joint Powers Authority Finance Committee and S.F. County Transportation Authority Vision Zero Committee; temporary member, Budget and Finance Committee; member, Association of Bay Area Government (ABAG). Legislative aides: April Veneracion, Barbara Lopez and Ivy Lee.

[Jane.Kim@sfgov.org](mailto:Jane.Kim@sfgov.org) 554-7970

The Adventures of  
**Trumpty Dumpty**  
Don't miss his next move

MEXICO

U.S.A.

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