

OBITUARY: Gordon Barnard

Feb. 27, 1936 – Nov. 26, 2011

BY JASON A. MICHAEL

ROSEVILLE – He was known as a character, a diva and a legend – at least in his own mind – by those who loved him and knew him well. Gordon Barnard, 75, died Nov. 27th after suffering a series of serious falls.

Born in Eldorado, Ill., Barnard moved with his parents to Detroit when he was five.

He went on to study commercial art at Cass Technical High School. Immediately upon graduation in 1955, he was hired as graphic designer for the Michigan Consolidated Gas Company. He would go on to work for the company for 35 years.

“He was an expert in hand lettering, a long lost art,” said his longtime friend and fellow Cass Tech classmate Charles Alexander. “Everything these days is

digital, but he did it all by hand.”

An only child, Barnard was particularly close to his mother. Coming out in the 1950s though, the two soon quarreled about his sexual orientation and became estranged.

“She confronted him about being gay and told him he would have move out if he didn’t go to a psychiatrist,” Alexander said.

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“As a result, he moved out. He was proudly gay, even way back when.”

An avid film fan, Barnard’s favorites were Rita Hayworth and James Dean, and friends often referred to him as the latter. He amassed a large collection of movie memorabilia and other art in his lifetime and, friends say, had a general taste for the finer things in life.

Barnard loved to tell stories of his younger years and many escapades. He claimed to have once been propositioned by Tennessee Williams and met Joan Crawford at Hudson’s in downtown Detroit. He also corresponded with legendary burlesque star Lili St. Cyr for more than a decade before her death.

“Gordon thought nothing of going up to anyone who was famous and speaking to them on a very friendly basis, as though he had known them for a long period of time,” said Alexander.

Donna Faye Bradley said she’ll always remember her cousin’s flamboyance.

“He was ‘The Gord’ and he would tell you,” she said. “But he had a kind heart. He had a good heart – as long as you didn’t cross him. Now if you crossed him, look out.”

In 2004, Barnard spoke about growing older to *Between The Lines* for a story on gay seniors.

“I regard myself as a curiosity because here I am, at the age of 68, and yet I can’t relate to older people,” he said. “I will take advantage of the senior benefits and all that, but I could not live in a commune or a retirement home because I’d feel out of place. I aim to keep aware and abreast of current events. I don’t want to fall into that trap, which seems to be an easy thing for people to do, and ease into old age. I see that all the time. I witness people who are younger than I am acting older than I am. There’s something about people that they seem to relax into old age, and I won’t let that happen.”

Barnard and Alexander had drifted apart after high school but reconnected in 1998, when Barnard saw a column of Alexander’s in *BTL*. The two spoke every day and met for lunch once a week in Royal Oak until Barnard’s health began to fail. Then, in true Hollywood fashion, Barnard became a recluse and rarely ventured out.

He fell and broke his hip this summer. Shortly following surgery and his return home, he fell and broke it a second time. The falls led to a quick decline and Barnard was unable to recover.

Barnard was preceded in death by his partner of 22 years, Bill Owmbly. Bailey is taking her cousin home to Illinois one last time and he will be interred in Woodlawn Cemetery in Newton.