

# Harry Kevorkian, Ann Arbor gay and labor activist, dies at 54

By TIM RETZLOFF

Harry "Kitty" Kevorkian, a memorable force in gay liberation and labor activism in Ann Arbor throughout the 1970s, died Feb. 3, 2002, at his home in Boston at age 54. The cause was an apparent heart attack.

Born Aug. 7, 1947, the burly Kevorkian grew up in Waterford and was president of Michigan Youth for Goldwater in high school. In 1965, he started at the University of Michigan and soon became radicalized, getting a 4-F draft deferment at 18. "I just marched into the draft board and told them I'm queer," he told Duke University doctoral student Ian Lekus in 1999.

Known to friends as "Miss Kitty," Kevorkian was an early activist in Ann Arbor's Gay Liberation Front, causing local commotion in numerous "zaps," variously targeting the American Psychiatric Association, a screening of "Boys in the Band," and the Flame Bar, which had been excluding cross-dressers.

"Kitty came into Gay Liberation meetings full of politically transformative ideas and more energy than the rest of us put together," remembered Jim Toy, an affirmative action officer at

the University of Michigan.

Kevorkian and a friend once wore skag drag and crashed a formal tea at the home of U-M President Robben Fleming to protest the university's treatment of gays. In his memoir "Tempests into Rainbows," Fleming wrote about the occasion: "One looked like a football lineman, and sported a great, hairy chest made even more evident by his low-cut gown." Twenty-five years later, he also remembered Kevorkian's name as Kitty.

In 1974, Kevorkian ran as an openly gay candidate for Ann Arbor City Council on the Human Rights Party slate, emphasizing rent control and a \$5 marijuana ordinance as issues in his campaign. Although he lost his bid, "Esquire" magazine acknowledged him with one of its annual Dubious Achievement Awards for listing "person" as his occupation on an election form.

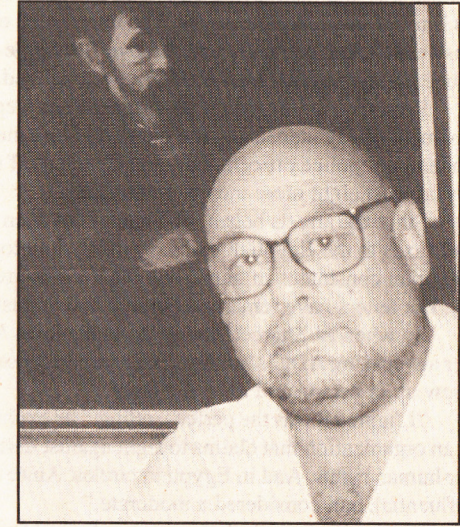
"Harry sought a redefinition of personhood, to push beyond the definition of what our culture gives," Laurence H. Scott recalled. Scott, together with Kevorkian and Gerald Naylor, founded a pro-feminist gay lib group called the Basic Education Project. "We

showed we weren't going to back down," said Scott.

As one of several out lesbian and gay bus drivers in Ann Arbor in the later 1970s, Kevorkian became active in the Transportation Employees Union and served as its president during a heated 42-day strike in 1980. Susan Schurman, president of the TEU prior to Kevorkian, credited his courage, humor, and smarts in promoting progressive values within labor at the time. "Harry was an integral part of it all," recalled Schurman, now director of the George Meany Center in Washington.

Kevorkian had resided in Boston for much of the past two decades. He lost his job with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in the midst of the 1996 gubernatorial campaign when a 1984 drug trafficking conviction and his interest in adult films were attacked in the Boston Globe. At the time of his death, he was employed at the law firm Rubin and Rudman.

In addition to loving food, opera, and trips to Key West, Kevorkian had recently resumed writing for the gay press. "He had an outsize appetite for everything, and at the same time he was pretty much a homebody and grounded,"



Harry "Kitty" Kevorkian. Photo courtesy Lewis Gannett

said Lewis Gannett, his housemate for the last six years.

Kevorkian is survived by many friends, his sister Kathleen, his brother William, an aunt, two nieces, a nephew, and two grandnieces. Details of a memorial service, planned for May, will be announced later.