



NEWS RELEASE

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Laundry Owner Who Befriended 'Queen Mimi' and Documentary Filmmaker to Be Honored at WISE & Healthy Aging's 'Celebration of Caring' Event

For Nearly 20 Years, Stan Fox's Laundromat Sheltered the 'Queen of Montana Avenue'



SANTA MONICA (April 26, 2017) – The date when the feisty homeless woman first showed up at his Santa Monica laundromat doesn't stand out in Stan Fox's memory, but the cold, wet night that would change the course of his life – and the life of the homeless woman – does.

"It was cold and rainy, and I just couldn't send her back out there," says Fox, owner of Fox Coin Laundries, who will be one of the honorees May 20 at the annual "Celebration of Caring" event presented by WISE & Healthy Aging, the Santa Monica-based nonprofit organization serving older adults and their families and caregivers throughout Los Angeles County.

Fox and filmmaker Yaniv Rokah, along with the filmmaking team of "Queen Mimi," will receive the "Compassion in Caring" award, one of three honors to be presented at the luncheon.

On that rain-drenched night in the early 1990s, Fox got a call from his janitor, who asked if the homeless woman who roamed Santa Monica's toney Montana Avenue could sleep inside his laundromat.

It was a huge risk from a lease and zoning perspective. From a liability standpoint, what would happen if a fire broke out or a disaster struck while she was inside?

But to Fox, cold and rain outweighed risk, and for the better part of the next 20 years, his laundromat provided a dry, warm, safe place for the woman who last year came to be known as "Queen Mimi" in a documentary by Rokah, who met Mimi when he worked as a barista at Caffè Luxxe across the street.

"It was love at first sight," says Rokah, an aspiring actor who turned filmmaker to tell Mimi's story. "I was very curious to know why she was camping out there every day. When I learned that she was living in the laundromat for a long time, and I realized that she was basically homeless but always kept her spirits high, I wanted to know how she managed to survive and be happy most of the time."

(more)

Mimi clearly considered the laundromat her domain. Even though she never was an employee, she'd call Fox on the pay phone when there were problems, would run off potential customers that she pegged as troublemakers, and she even set up her own laundry folding service on the premises.

"At that time, we offered folding and laundry support services, so in essence, Mimi was competing with me in my own store, but I didn't mind," says Fox, who recalls many spirited "discussions" with Mimi over the way she dealt with some of his customers.

And then Mimi appropriated a corner of his front window display area for her living quarters. The stuffed toys, chairs and small furnishings that people donated to her over time were prominently exhibited in the window.

"No businessman with any sense would allow a homeless person to set up camp in their front window on a trendy street like Montana Avenue," Fox says with a chuckle, adding that he had to bargain with her to reclaim his space. In exchange, she got a large storage closet in the back of the store. A locksmith was hired to change the locks – and only Mimi had a key.

Efforts by Fox and his wife to contribute to Mimi's wardrobe largely failed. After one Christmas shopping spree, coats, slacks, jeans, sweaters and blouses were unwrapped, inspected, rejected and returned to Nordstrom. When Mimi was hospitalized after tripping and falling in her flip-flops, Fox picked her up from the convalescent facility and drove to a department store to get safer, more cushioned shoes. After insisting that her shoe size was much smaller than it actually was, she finally settled on a pair of soft leather shoes. She wore them for two days before relegating them, apparently, to her private, locked storage closet.

"Queen Mimi," last year's documentary about Marie Elizabeth Haist, tells how the woman who once lived the comfortable life of a housewife ended up homeless in her 50s, slept on the streets of Los Angeles and Santa Monica, ate discarded leftovers and eventually became friends with comedian and actor Zach Galifianakis, actress Renee Zellweger and Rokah, who still sees Mimi at least once or twice a week.

"I have to have my Mimi fix," he says. "She is special in many ways for me and our community."

According to Rokah, Mimi was hesitant to share too many details when she realized he wanted to make a film about her life. She gradually became more trusting, but there still were secrets she tended to protect.

"I was blown away that I knew her all this time (five years) and she never mentioned her daughters," he says. "The most memorable moment for me was the premiere at The Aero Theatre in Santa Monica, where 500 people gathered to support Mimi and her film – and the cherry was to see her reunited with her daughter and granddaughters."

The little film he first envisioned became much more than he expected.

"It started as a pure curiosity project," says Rokah, who has several new projects in the works. "I wanted to understand how it was possible in this day and age for a woman in her 80s to be homeless. Of course, I was naïve. The message is really that you can't judge anybody, and that no matter what your situation is, if you keep the right attitude, you'll be fine."

Part of Mimi's story is her dogged determination to make the best of her circumstances. Part is the insight of others – a laundry owner, celebrities and others – to see something special in "the Queen of Montana

Avenue.” And a big part of the story is the nature of compassionate human beings to reach out to someone in need.

“Stan Fox was one of those who did not look the other way. When he learned that ‘Queen Mimi’ needed help, he befriended her and provided shelter and other support, not just in the short term, but for many years. His compassion represents the best of the human spirit,” says Grace Cheng Braun, president and CEO of WISE & Healthy Aging.

The presentation of the “Compassion in Caring” award to Stan Fox and Yaniv Rokah, along with the filmmaking team of “Queen Mimi,” will be part of WISE & Healthy Aging’s annual “Celebration of Caring” luncheon on Saturday, May 20, held at the Ritz Carlton Marina del Rey. Other awards that day will recognize members of the community for “Leadership in Caring” and “Caring for Our Community.” The “Celebration of Caring” event is open to businesses and the public, with proceeds supporting services and programs offered by the nonprofit WISE & Healthy Aging.

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ABOUT WISE & Healthy Aging

WISE & Healthy Aging is a multiservice, nonprofit organization serving older adults and their families and caregivers throughout Los Angeles County. Headquartered in Santa Monica, the team at WISE & Healthy Aging works to promote and improve the well-being, independence and self-esteem of seniors, and to prevent premature institutionalization whenever possible.