

OBITUARIES

Woodward bar owner Andy Karagas dies at 76

BY TIM RETZLOFF

DETROIT - Andy Karagas, the last of the three Karagas brothers who operated the famed Woodward Bar in the New Center area of Detroit since the early 1950s, died May 14 at his home in Indian Village. He was 76.

Andy had been in failing health for several months after suffering a series of strokes, the most recent in February. According to his niece Sophia, he last visited the Woodward the Sunday before he died.

In 1952, Andy's brother Bill first opened the bar in the Lewis Art Supply Building. Two years later, it moved to 6426 Woodward, where it has operated ever since. According to a history of the Woodward in a 1984 issue of *Cruise*, Andy unlocked the door for business with only two bottles of Seven Crown and a dozen bottles of Stroh's leftover from the previous owner.

In a 1973 interview with the newspaper *Gayzette*, Andy noted that the Woodward became gay in the early 1950s by happenstance.

"We just opened it up and whichever way it went, it went," Andy said. "And when it went gay all the way, we kicked out all the straights that night."

Detroit artist Charles Alexander first started going to the Woodward in 1959, when it was the most popular of the city's few gay bars. "The bar was really a comfortable place for a young gay person to be," Alexander recalled. "It was a safe haven for us at the time." Nonetheless, men were not allowed to touch one another.

Alexander noted that Andy had shown

great support for the gay community. He was known to bail out customers who had been arrested by police on soliciting charges.

Tom Guiseppe, owner of the Backstreet and a member of the Detroit Bar Guild, knew Andy for nearly 40 years. To Guiseppe, who worked as a bartender at the Woodward in the early 1960s, Andy was synonymous with the Woodward, creating the bar's personality. "It was like going there to see a friend."

Guiseppe said that Andy was respected by other bar owners. He noted that over the years Andy served as a mentor to several young men who, like himself, went on to open their own gay bars.

"He was an icon in the city," Guiseppe said. "It's the passing of an era."

About 50 people attended Andy's memorial service held May 19 at Verheyden Funeral Home in Grosse Pointe Park. He was buried in Forest Lawn Cemetery in Detroit.

Andy was preceded in death by his brothers Bill and Sam. He is survived by several nieces and nephews, and by Bill's widow, Lorraine, who will continue to run the Woodward.

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photo courtesy of *Cruise Magazine*

Andy Karagas, with his brothers Bill and Sam, at the Woodward in 1995.