

## David Ryan, 55, Dies In Village Fire

By ALBERT AMATEAU



### Longtime Gay Street resident led fight against new PATH station on Christopher

Firefighters who responded to the 12:50 a.m. alarm on December 25 at 14 Gay Street found Ryan already dead of smoke inhalation. The fire was deemed accidental, apparently ignited in newspapers and phone books piled on top of an electrical wire, a fire department spokesperson said.

The apartment where Ryan, an out gay man, lived for 28 years was made famous in “My Sister Eileen,” a short story collection by Ruth McKenney originally published in The New Yorker magazine in the 1930s and made into a Broadway play, then a movie in the 1940s and again into the 1953 musical “Wonderful Town” currently being revived on Broadway.

Ryan, 55, a retired insurance executive, became involved in the neighborhood fight against the plan to put a second exit/entrance to the Ninth Street PATH station on Christopher Street on the morning of May 22, 2002 when he was jolted out of bed by an explosive charge set off by a crew making test borings at the corner of Gay and Christopher Streets.

He mobilized neighbors in a demonstration against the city Department of Transportation and the Port Authority over the threat to the structural integrity of the 1827 brick house at 14 Gay Street posed by the PATH plans. Elected officials and preservation advocates joined the fight and delayed the project.

Ryan and his fellow protestors insisted that the Port Authority’s request for \$26 million in Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funds for additional PATH entrances at both the Ninth Street and the Hudson Street stations was improper. FEMA eventually agreed and the agency rejected the Port Authority request in January 2003. The extra entrance for the Ninth Street PATH station, planned for Christopher St. between Sixth and Seventh Avenues is currently the subject of an environmental study.

Ryan often observed that “My Sister Eileen” and the plays derived from it included a scene in which laborers working on the Eighth Avenue subway tunnel in 1936 jackhammer their way

through the floor of the basement apartment of 14 Gay Street—an ironic reminder of how underground construction could threaten fragile Village buildings.

“It was funny in the play,” he told a New York Times reporter two weeks ago, “but really, just think about it. One boom and it’s over. I would die if I had to leave.”

The Times piece followed a November article written by Jerry Tallmer in *The Villager*, a sister publication of *Gay City News*, about Ryan and Celeste Martin, his landlady and friend, and the historic house on the one-block-long Gay St. which curves from Waverly Place to Christopher Street.

Ryan remained a relentless critic of the Port Authority but he earned the respect of preservationists and elected officials for his dedication.

“He was passionate in defense of his home and neighborhood—you had to love him for that,” said Assemblymember Deborah Glick. “He had a very dry wit and among the over-the-top accusations that he leveled at the Port Authority there was always a kernel of truth. You had to respect him because he didn’t just complain, he did a lot of work.”

Cristabel Gough, a Christopher Street resident and preservation advocate who worked with Ryan for the past year and a half, said the fight against the PATH project was Ryan’s first foray into community advocacy.

“He was doing a terrific job and we’re going to miss him,” she said.

Martin, Ryan’s friend and landlady, said she was devastated by his death. She owns seven properties on Gay and Christopher Streets left to her by her late father. Ryan often acted as a rental agent for apartments in the houses.

Barbara Flanagan, of 12 Gay Street, his neighbor for 18 years, said Ryan was a remarkable personality.

“It was a life-changing experience to know him,” she said. “He was so funny and free, an unfettered guy with a raunchy wit.”

On Christmas Eve, the night of the fire, Flanagan, whose apartment shares a party wall with 14 Gay Street, said she smelled wood smoke but she was not alarmed because she thought it came from Ryan’s fireplace.

“I’ve had arguments with him for years because he used starter fluid to ignite the logs in his fireplace,” Flanagan said. “I finally told him, ‘David, no more starter fluid,’ but I was there on December 23 and I saw 25 squeeze bottles of fluid on the mantelpiece.”

Ryan’s basement apartment was ordinarily accessible through a door at 20 Christopher Street, which led to the garden and the entrance to the back room of his apartment, Flanagan said. An iron gate and heavy planters blocked the basement entrance on Gay Street to Ryan’s front room. Firefighters were not aware of the Christopher Street access and had to break through the gate and the planters to reach the apartment, Flanagan said. The fire, however, did most damage in the back room where Ryan slept.

William Candis, Ryan’s partner for the past four years, was a frequent visitor to the Gay Street garden apartment. “It’s been the most important thing in my life,” he said this week.

Ryan’s triangular garden, with a rainbow flag and a French flag always flying, was described by friends as a “magical” place. Ryan told friends that it reminded him of “The Wind in the Willows,” a children’s classic by Kenneth Graham about the adventures of carefree animal characters.

When Ryan was 22 he won a Fulbright scholarship to Paris; his study plan was to explore the influence of Paris on American writers like James Baldwin.

“I didn’t plan to research anything, I just wanted to go to Paris,” he told a friend last year. At the first meeting in Paris of that year’s Fulbright scholars, Baldwin burst into the room and demanded, “Who the hell is David Ryan?” It was the beginning of a fabulous year, Ryan recalled. “He knew every writer and every gay hangout in Paris.”

Ryan remained a Francophile ever since. He recorded a French translation of his answering machine message, ending with “Allez les enfants,” a rallying phrase that means, “Let’s go, kids.”

In addition to Candis, he is survived by his father, Edmund J. Ryan of Ft. Myers, Fla.; his two brothers: Scott, of Boston, and Craig, of St. Louis; and a niece and a nephew. A memorial service is scheduled for Saturday, January 3 at Trinity Episcopal Church in Tariff-ville, Conn. near Hartford. A later memorial service is being planned for a Saturday, January 17 or January 24, at St. Thomas Episcopal Church on Fifth Ave. at 53rd St. with a reception to follow at the University Club on Fifth Ave. at 54th St. Final plans will be announced soon.

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