

Revered wharf matriarch dies at 83 in Santa Cruz

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By J.M. Brown

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Gilda J. Stagnaro, the beloved matriarch of the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf who for more than 35 years ran a landmark family restaurant that bears her name, is dead.

Ms. Stagnaro died Friday morning after collapsing in the driving wind and rain just 90 feet from Gilda's, her restaurant. She was 83.

Family members said she suffered a coronary-related incident after arriving to work about 9 a.m. Stagnaro, who had a history of heart trouble and two hip replacements, was pronounced dead at Dominican Hospital a short time later.

"It is how she wanted to die," said nephew Geoffrey Dunn, a Santa Cruz author and historian. "She told everybody she wanted to die with her boots on at the wharf."

After a brief career as a school secretary, Stagnaro, the ninth of 11 children born to an immigrant Italian fishing and market dynasty whose first business opened in Santa Cruz in 1884, launched Gilda's on the site of her family's Sport Fishers Coffee Shop.

Gilda's is the last holding of the family corporation, C. Stagnaro Fishing. She and brother Robert "Big Boy" Stagnaro, 79, who lived next door, have headed the corporation for several decades.

Ms. Stagnaro's older sister, Yolanda "Lindy" Stagnaro Dunn, 92, was the last to see Ms. Stagnaro alive Friday when she left the house the two women have shared for two decades on the family compound near Bay and Laguna streets in Santa Cruz. Dunn said her sister had been complaining of heart problems in recent days but seemed in good spirits as she left.

"I asked her, 'Are you sure you can make it?'" because it was quite stormy," Dunn said. "She was very anxious to get to the wharf. She lived a life on the wharf. ... That is where she was the happiest."

Relatives, friends and civic leaders remembered her as "queen of the wharf," where she continued to work 40 hours per week as a hostess, cashier and sometime waitress and table busser who



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Gilda Stagnaro and her brother Bob "Big Boy" Stagnaro at her restaurant in 2006.

GILDA J. STAGNARO

Born: March 31, 1924 in Santa Cruz

Died: Jan. 4, 2008 in Santa Cruz

Survived by: A brother, Robert "Big Boy" Stagnaro; a sister, Yolanda "Lindy" Stagnaro Dunn; numerous nieces and nephews; and more than 100 cousins.

Services: Have been held

knew customers on a first-name basis. She was a long-time advocate of saving the wharf when costs associated with maintaining one of California's oldest wharves threatened its closure numerous times.

"She is definitely going to be missed," Santa Cruz City Councilman Mike Rotkin said. "She is an institution in the community."

Nephew Malio Stagnaro said he and brother Dino will continue to manage the restaurant with their father, Robert Stagnaro, but said it will be impossible to fill his aunt's shoes.

"She basically was the caretaker of the family," Malio Stagnaro said. "If anyone was sick or in trouble, they came to Gilda."

Bill Tysseling, executive director of the Santa Cruz

Chamber of Commerce, said: "She ran the restaurant like it was her own kitchen, welcomed everyone like they were the next-door neighbor, treated the regulars like they were family."

Born in March 1924 in Santa Cruz, the daughter of Cottardo Stagnaro Jr. and his wife, Battistina Loero, graduated from Santa Cruz High School in 1941. She was named Gilda after a sister born before her who died of pneumonia at age 2.

In the 1940s, after working at Mission Hill Jr. High School, Ms. Stagnaro joined the family's wharf businesses begun by her immigrant grandfather, Cottardo Stagnaro Sr.

Ms. Stagnaro, who never married and had no children, managed the coffee shop that later turned into her own res-

taurant, where relatives said she was not above performing any job, including seating diners, taking orders, cleaning tables and keeping the books.

After she suffered a heart attack about 12 years ago, Dunn said, "We all tried to caution her to slow down. Quite frankly, she didn't want to."

State Assemblyman John Laird, D-Santa Cruz, a former Santa Cruz mayor and long-time councilman, said, "It's hard to imagine the wharf without her."

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