

GILDA STAGNARO: 1924-2008

'Queen of the wharf' dead at 83

By J.M. BROWN
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SANTA CRUZ — Gilda J. Stagnaro, the beloved matriarch of the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf who for more than 35 years ran the landmark family restaurant that bears her name, died Friday morning after collapsing in the driving wind and rain just 90 feet from the business. She was 83.

The official cause of death was not immediately available Friday, but family members said her cardiologist determined Stagnaro suffered a coronary-related incident

outside Gilda's Restaurant shortly 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."

Dunn said several people reported seeing her fall near her parking



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space outside Gilda's, but it was not clear if the high wind from Friday's severe winter storm contributed to her death. Ironically, Stagnaro told the Sentinel in May 1971 that she loved spending stormy days at the wharf, much like the one that caused widespread power outages and numerous traffic accidents Friday.

"I love these days," she told reporter Wallace Wood for an article about Gilda's, which is known for its breakfasts and sandwiches. "The trouble is that the wharf makes me seasick, it moves so much."

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 former Sport Fishers Coffee Shop. Gilda's is the last holding of the family corporation, C. Stagnaro Fishing Co., that she and brother Robert "Big Boy" Stagnaro, 79, have headed for several decades. The company is not connected to the Stagnaro Bros. Seafood Inc., also on the wharf, or the former Stagnaro Liquors in Santa Cruz, run by other Stagnaro families.

Stagnaro's older sister, Yolanda "Lindy" Stagnaro Dunn, 92, was the last to see 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. Dunn said her sister, who had been complaining of heart problems in recent days but seemed in good spirits, looked "beautiful" as she left carrying Dunn's Burberry tote bag.

"I asked her, 'Are you sure you can make it,' because it was quite stormy this morning," 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."

Besides her brother and sister, Stagnaro is survived by numerous nieces and nephews, and more than 100 cousins. She never married and had no children.

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 knew customers on a first-name basis. She was a longtime advocate of saving the wharf when piling replacement and other costs associated with maintaining one of California's oldest wharfs threatened its closure numerous times.

"It's a total tragedy — she is definitely going to be missed," said six-term Santa Cruz City



Contributed photo

Gilda Stagnaro, on the wharf in 1947, records catches from the fishing boats.

Councilman Mike Rotkin, who has dined at Gilda's regularly. "She is an institution in the community."

Nephew Malio Stagnaro said he and brother Dino will continue to manage the restaurant with their father, "Big Boy," but said it will be impossible to fill his aunt's shoes. The restaurant was closed Friday, along with the rest of the wharf, because of the storm, but will reopen whenever the wharf opens.

"We are kind of in the grieving process, but right now we are planning on holding down the fort," Malio Stagnaro said. "She basically was the caretaker of the family. If anyone was sick or in trouble, they came to Gilda."

Noting that Gilda's didn't close during the Loma Prieta earthquake or 1982 flood, Geoffrey Dunn said, "She would have been livid that they closed the wharf (on Friday)."

"Gilda was the queen of the wharf," said Bill Tysseling, executive director of the Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce. "She ran the restaurant like it was her own kitchen, welcomed

Gilda J. Stagnaro

BORN: March 31, 1924.

DIED: Jan. 4, 2008.

EDUCATION: Santa Cruz High School, 1941.

SURVIVORS: Sister Yolanda 'Lindy' Stagnaro Dunn, brother Robert 'Big Boy' Stagnaro, numerous nephews, nieces and cousins.

SERVICES: 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Wednesday, Benito & Azzaro Pacific Gardens Chapel, 1050 Cayuga St. Private interment.

everyone like they were the next-door neighbor, treated the regulars like they were family."

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

In the 1940s, after working at Mission Hill Junior High School, Stagnaro joined the family's wharf businesses begun by her immigrant grandfather Cottardo Stagnaro Sr. She managed the coffee shop that later turned into her own restaurant, where relatives said she was not above performing any job, including seating diners, taking orders, cleaning tables and keeping the books.

"There was a point in the 1970s and 1980s that she worked 16 to 18 hours a day," Geoffrey Dunn said. "It was pretty phenomenal. She did whatever needed to be done."

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

Rotkin, whose son used to work at the restaurant, said, "These are working class people who, although they own their own business, never saw themselves as anything other than salt-of-the-earth workers. They were incredibly gracious hosts."

Brother "Big Boy" called his sister's death "a great loss" for the family and the community.

"There wasn't a person that she never met that she never loved — that was her great trait in life," he said. "It was the Santa Cruzans that gave the family the chance to become successful."

Assemblyman John Laird, D-Santa Cruz, a former mayor and longtime councilman, said, "It's hard to imagine the wharf without her." She was "always a leader of the wharf" whose "life was her family and the restaurant."

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