

# 'Rainbow's' death leaves many blue

By **DAN WHITE**  
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APTOS — Rita Virginia Johnson, the Cooper House Rainbow Lady, wasn't known to dress down or sit still in Mass.

Scarves, sleigh bells, red leotard stockings, doilies, silver slippers and carnations were significant aspects of her dress code.

Known to all as "Rainbow Ginger," she'd shake her tambourine or a stick with a feathered dove on top while she danced at the Cooper House, in church or at the Capitola wharf.

Her death Monday at age 86 means that part of Santa Cruz's free-spirited and eccentric past is gone. She died at a Santa Cruz convalescent hospital, several months after being hospitalized for a fractured pelvis suffered in a fall.

When dancing, her heart-shaped earrings and vestments dangled. She used to sway past the tables at the Cooper House when Don Mc-



**Johnson**

Known as the Cooper House Rainbow Lady

Caslin's band, Warmth, was playing.

"She never danced in time with the music," said one of Rainbow Ginger's friends, Velma Greyell of Aptos. "But she danced with the utmost sincerity. It was her true feeling. That was the way she was doing her worshipping."

It seems appropriate that Rainbow Ginger will always be linked to the Cooper House, which was demolished after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, and has turned into a symbol of the city's good old days.

It didn't matter to her if some people who didn't know her thought she

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## Rainbow

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was kooky. Rainbow Ginger was a devout Catholic who was willing to pray with anyone at any time.

She told friends that she'd defeated alcoholism by putting her faith in God. Her multi-colored outfits had everything to do with her faith, Greyell said.

"The rainbow is a sign of God's promise of good to come," Greyell said.

Rainbow Ginger was a humanitarian who did volunteer work with alcoholics, prisoners, the homeless and the sick. She had costumes for her many characters, including Valentine Lady, Sadie Claus, Rainbow the Clown, Mother Nature and Forever Blooming.

People often didn't know her full name but they'd call out, "Hey Rainbow," when she walked by. Once, a friendly voice called from far above, "Hey, it's Ginger."

She looked up. It turned out to be a PG&E lineman high on a pole.

She enjoyed the attention.

"Being considered a clown all the time doesn't bother me," she said in a 1984 interview. "That's the way I am. I'm brightening up the world even if I don't feel bright sometimes inside."

Before her Santa Cruz days, she and her sister, Elinor Montgomery, started a business that provided exotic displays for merchant windows, including a live shark, an octopus, a Guernsey bull, 5,000 trout, a crystal ball and a children's carousel.

While living in the Bay Area, she was a leader in many charitable groups including the Society For the Welfare of Epileptics and the Red Cross. She volunteered in alcoholic wards of hospitals in Martinez, Napa and El Cerrito.

Rainbow Ginger's persona developed after she moved to Santa Cruz with her husband, Homer Johnson, a retired police sergeant who died of cancer in 1988.

One of Rainbow Ginger's friends, Dick Leeman, said she had a vulnerable side many people never saw, and that it took courage to get up and dance the way she did.

"People are surprised to learn she was self-conscious," he said. "It took a little boldness on her part. It was deliberate. She called it her ministry. Sometimes she had to talk herself into it."

**'I'm brightening up the world even if I don't feel bright sometimes inside.'**

**— Rainbow Ginger, in 1994 interview**

But Santa Cruzans were warm to her, and grieved when area print and TV media ran a story in 1992 that "the Rainbow Lady" had died.

The stories actually were a garbled reference to another

colorful Santa Cruzan, "Kozmic Ladye" Janice Aurah Kramer.

Area residents reacted with relief, and shock, when Rainbow Ginger turned up alive and well.

In later years, her appearances became more infrequent. She eventually took up residence at the Chanticleer Home, a Santa Cruz retirement home.

But friends brightened up her plain room with yards of rainbow fabric and silhouettes of cowboys, along with a wicker desk painted purple and green.

She is survived by daughter Virginia Edith Marie Johnson, and several nieces and nephews.

Services will be 10 a.m. Friday at Our Lady Star of the Sea Church, 515 Frederick St., Santa Cruz. A reception in the church hall will follow. A vigil service will be 7 p.m. today at Norman's Family Chapel, 3620 Soquel Drive, Soquel.