

H O B O K E N
REPORTER

Death of a drag queen

Hoboken's celebrated Malcolm "Marsha" Michaels drowns under mysterious circumstances

By Andy Newman
Reporter staff writer

For over a dozen years in Hoboken, Malcolm Michaels Jr. led a quiet, anonymous life. But across the Hudson river, in whose waters Michaels' bloated body was found floating on July 6, Michaels was Marsha P. Johnson: transvestite, panderer, career prostitute, pioneering activist and legendary figure in New York's gay community.

The circumstances surrounding Michaels' death seem every bit as bizarre and mysterious as his life. The medical examiner lists the cause of death as suicide. Some gay rights groups, noting that Michaels was spotted soon before his death on a Christopher Street corner where a gay man was assaulted several hours later, believe he may have been murdered.

Michaels' longtime housemate in Hoboken, Randy Wicker, says that if Michaels' death was not a murder, it was an "accidental drowning." Wicker says that Michaels had a history of mental illness and may have attempted to follow a hallucination into the water. But two weeks after Michaels' death, as the trail grows cold, it seems increasingly unlikely that the cause will ever be known for sure.

Queen of the scene

Born in Elizabeth 46 years ago, Michaels came to New York in the mid-1960s and quickly rose to notoriety. He played a highly visible role in the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion, the watershed of the fledgling gay liberation movement. He modeled for an Andy Warhol

silkscreen portrait. He starred in the Hot Peaches Revue. He was famous for being famous.

But those who knew him remember Marsha as an erratic but endlessly loving and caring person.

Wicker, a journalist and one of the first gay activists in the country (he hosted a radio show on WBAI in 1962) called Marsha a "national treasure."

"Marsha rose above being male or female, black or white, straight or gay," Wicker said. "She transcended all boundaries."

Marge Pease, a Hoboken resident and volunteer for FAITH Services, an AIDS support organization, got to know Michaels while both of them helped care for Wicker's lover, who died of AIDS in 1990. "Marsha helped me make the transition from being somewhat restricted in my vision to seeing a much bigger world," said Pease. "I feel like a real spark has gone out."

In addition to his other pursuits, Marsha also sold his body tirelessly for nearly 30 years. Wicker describes him as "the only hooker I ever met — male or female — who actually enjoyed his work." About four years ago, however, Michaels tested positive for the AIDS virus. Although Wicker admits that Marsha continued to hustle (albeit at a fraction of his former pace), he insists that Marsha was extremely conscientious about practicing safe sex. But his potentially lethal behavior remains a troubling contradiction to the picture of a thoughtful, caring person painted by surviving friends and family.



The late Malcolm "Marsha" Michaels poses with an Andy Warhol portrait of him/herself.

Free spirit

In 1980, on a cold winter night, Wicker's adopted son Willie asked if Marsha could come over and sleep on the floor of Wicker's Marine View Plaza apartment. Initially suspicious but unable to say no, Wicker assented.

Though he horrified Wicker's "straight" middle-class gay friends, Marsha quickly became the unofficial house mother to Wicker's extended household. "Letting

Marsha into my home was one of the turning points in my life," Wicker said. "He was the most generous person I ever knew."

Wicker said that just about all he asked of his permanent guest was that Michaels not leave the building in drag, so as not to attract negative attention, and that he do the laundry every Thursday.

But one of Wicker's neighbors, Annette Illing, said that Marsha still found ways to make trouble.

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"A while ago," Illing recalled, "one of the previous supers was on a rampage about people subletting illegally. One day he saw someone go into the laundry room, and he followed the person in, and said, 'Who are you and where do you live?' It was Marsha in a blond wig and drag and he said, 'It's the maid from 10E.' The man was so shocked he couldn't do anything. He just left."

Aside from neighbors and friends, the only Hobokenites who knew about Michaels' alter ego were the volunteers who run the St. Mary Hospital Thrift Shop on Garden Street, where Michaels bought many of his most memorable outfits.

Shirley Hatchett remembered "the fella that used to buy all the gowns" as a "wonderful, sweet person." As she looked through a stack of snapshots of Marsha decked out in his St. Mary finest, she added, "He had good taste in clothing, too. He really knew his colors and his fabrics."

"I can't get over him," Hatchett's colleague Millie Desio said. "He was so nice. He used to come in and see a gown and say, 'Ohh, I have to get that.'"

A turn for the worse

Unfortunately, Wicker said, Marsha also had the disturbing tendency to "go mental" from time to time. He had had several breakdowns over the course of the last 30 years, and he seemed to be having another on the weekend of July Fourth that, one way or another, probably contributed to his downfall.

July 2 was a Thursday, a washday. Wicker says that Marsha, who had been acting weird for a while, seemed particularly disturbed that morning, displaying what Wicker called "the excessive religiosity that had been the harbinger of previous psychotic episodes."

After handing out bouquets of flowers to friends and family and disposing of personal belongings,



Marsha leading the charge in an outfit from the St. Mary Hospital Thrift Shop.

Marsha left the apartment. He never returned.

When Michaels' seriously decomposed body washed up the following Monday, Wicker assumed Marsha had died the day he left Hoboken. But after a Village-wide appeal for information, a man came forward who said he had spoken to Marsha after Saturday's Fourth of July fireworks. The man said Marsha had seemed disoriented and paranoid, complaining "the Mafia is after me" and "they're putting AIDS in the food." He was the last acquaintance to confirm having seen Marsha alive. Wicker says that during Marsha's last breakdown in 1991, he reported seeing his long-dead father in the water on the bottom of the river. Though Wicker thinks foul play is still a "50-50 possibility," he also believes Marsha may have had a hallucination last week like the one he had last year and simply walked out onto the river to join his loved ones.

Whatever the cause of death, Wicker feels certain that Marsha was "absolutely incapable of intentionally destroying herself." Despite the medical examiner's finding, the police investigation into the death is continuing. Wicker talked to the medical examiner on Thursday, and said she offered to change the cause of death from suicide to "unknown" if the evidence warrants it.

Next Sunday, July 26, there will be a memorial service for Marsha at Duane Methodist Church on 13th Street in the Village. The Big Apple Band will lead a parade, and Wicker expects hundreds if not thousands of people to attend and share their memories. Afterwards, half of Marsha's ashes will be scattered in the Hudson off the Christopher Street pier.

The following Sunday, Wicker plans to scatter the remainder of the ashes in the river on the Hoboken side. "Marsha really lived in both places," he said.

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MARSHA from page 3

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FOOTNOTE: IT IS WITH GREAT PLEASURE THAT I MAKE THIS REPRINT OF THIS MOST BEAUTIFUL ARTICLE AVAILABLE TO ALL OF MARSHA'S FRIENDS. IT BRILLIANTLY CAPTURES THE WAY MARSHA INTERACTED WITH OUR HOMETOWN HOBOKEN NEIGHBORS & WON THEIR HEARTS AS SHE WON THE HEARTS OF PEOPLE EVERYWHERE.

Randy Wicker

RANDY WICKER