

OBITUARY

Marsha P. Johnson

by John Hammond

Marsha P. Johnson, the drag queen who was a well-known campaigner for gay rights and the most prominent survivor of the Stonewall Rebellion, died on July 2 or 3, according to police. Marsha was last seen by a housemate, leaving home on the morning of July 2, dressed in man's clothing. The body was found floating in the Hudson River near the foot of Christopher Street on Monday afternoon and identified through fingerprints; authorities believe it had been in the water for several days. As *Native* went to press, autopsy results were not available and it was not clear whether the death was a suicide, an accident, or the result of foul play, although one of Marsha's housemates, Randy Wicker, believes Marsha could have fallen in the river as a result of mental disturbance and depression over the recent deaths of



Marsha Johnson (r), with sister Naomi Michaels

several friends. Witnesses who may have seen Marsha that day or can shed light on how she died are asked to call the Anti-Violence Hotline, 212-807-0197, or Det. Abreu at the 6th Precinct.

Marsha, who preferred to refer to herself with feminine pronouns, was born Malcolm Michaels, Jr., in Elizabeth, New Jersey, on August 26, 1945. A familiar figure on Village streets since the early 1960s, she was one of many young drag queens who patronized the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street. Marsha joined those who fought back on the early morning of June 28, 1969, when police raided and closed the bar. In the months just after Stonewall, she became an active and vocal member of the newly-formed Gay Liberation Front, and also a founder of a street-theater group, Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries (STAR), which evolved into the Hot Peaches theatrical troupe, with whom Marsha also performed. Marsha also participated in arts activities at Gay Activists Alliance. For much of her adult life, Marsha worked as a prostitute on West Street and, memorably, as a panhandler on Christopher Street.

A gentle, kind, non-judgmental person,

Marsha was a mentor for many young men, especially those who liked to wear drag, in what could sometimes be an intimidating and exploitative world. She took great delight in devising costumes for herself, ranging from slightly frumpy housewife to elaborate, glittering high drag, in which she appeared on the streets and, especially, at festive events like the gay pride marches. Blessed with a naturally well-muscled body that could have been the despair of any gym slave, tall with broad shoulders and narrow hips, in drag she would somehow shrink into a soft, feminine persona that seemingly had no relationship to her appearance as a man in jeans and T-shirt. In drag, she was a model for one of Andy Warhol's best-known photo silkscreen prints, one in a series showing drag queens. In print, Marsha was featured in a 1972 book about early gay activists, *The Gay Crusaders* by Kay Tobin and Randy Wicker.

In the late 1970s, some members of the Christopher Street Liberation Day Committee, which then organized the Gay Pride March, presumed to ask Marsha and other drag queens not to appear in costume because they thought it would undermine the serious image of homosexuality they wanted to project. Marsha's response was characteristic: sweetly but firmly she and some friends went about organizing their own, non-militant "Gaywalk for Freedom," to which everyone was invited, and which preceded the official parade by a few minutes, over the same route. When the Gaywalk reached Central Park it adjourned to The Ramble for a lighthearted birthday picnic in honor of Stonewall, while the official marchers endured the rigors of a long and dull gay pride rally a few fields away.

After a year or two of separate marching, Marsha was welcomed back into the official Gay Pride March and often appeared, in the improbable company of the late Ed Murphy, onetime manager of the Stonewall Inn, behind a banner identifying them as "Stonewall Survivors." Except for one or two occasions when she was out of town, Marsha was present at every gay pride march, including the one on June 28 this year.

In addition to housemates Randy Wicker and George Flimlin, with whom she had lived since 1980, Marsha is survived by brother and sisters Robert, Jean, and Norma Michaels of Elizabeth, New Jersey, and uncounted friends. A memorial service, remembrance and celebration is tentatively planned for Sunday, July 26 at 3 p.m., at Duane United Methodist Church, Seventh Avenue at 13th Street. ■

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