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Memorial will remember life of lesbian activist and lawyer

By Maria Kantzavelos

Law Bulletin staff writer

Retired Colorado attorney Gerald Gerash said his thoughts turned to the late longtime lesbian activist and Chicago attorney Renee C. Hanover when he learned of a highly-publicized melee earlier this month in the Boystown section of Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood in which a man was stabbed.

"If Renee were alive, she'd be on the phone constantly all day trying to organize something," Gerash said. "She would've been at that CAPS meeting and put the whole issue right into perspective, and really allowed people to think in broad terms of living together, and discussing racism — how poisonous it is and how it divides people.

"That was a big issue for her: That the enemy is always trying to divide and conquer, and we cannot be doing the work of the enemy. We need to reach out to each other and appreciate each other."

Gerash, who met Hanover in the early 1970s when the two first became active in the National Lawyers Guild is among the friends, former colleagues, members of the LGBT community and the legal community at large who plan to attend a memorial for Hanover on Saturday.

Hanover, who moved to California several years ago to be near her daughter, Nancy Hanover, died Jan 5 at age 84.

The community memorial in Chicago celebrating Hanover's life will be from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. at 1900 Prairie Ave., near the city's South Loop area.

Hanover, who was believed to be the first "out" lesbian attorney in the country, was admitted to the Illinois bar in 1969, when she was in her 40s. Her practice in Chicago, which frequently involved pro bono work, was focused largely on representing gay, lesbian and transgender clients, according to those who knew her.

Her work included defending gay men against police entrapment, helping to overturn Chicago's so-called "zipper law," which banned cross-dressing, and representing black lesbians who claimed they were being discriminated against at white lesbian bars. The Black Panthers were also among her clients, and in the early 1960s she was instrumental in organizing a "freedom wage-in" at Rainbow Beach on the city's South Shore in an effort to desegregate Chicago's beaches.

Cook County Associate Judge Nancy J. Katz considers Hanover a mentor and a role model.

"She was really a pioneer in our community,"



Renee C. Hanover

Katz said. "She was one of the first out lawyers that I knew. She made it seem possible to me that I could be a lawyer and I could be out. And she was absolutely fearlessly dedicated to her clients."

Katz said she first met Hanover in 1973, when Hanover was representing Katz's friend in a custody battle in which the woman's husband was trying to take custody of the couple's children because his wife had come out as a lesbian.

Since that first meeting, the judge over the years joined Hanover on various political issues, including marches against domestic violence, and causes in support of lesbian and gay rights.

"She was a fiery activist and wonderful person," Katz said. "She represented clients who had been marginalized by society.

"I remember how moved she was when I was appointed to the bench as the first open lesbian [judge] in the state. I remember her saying to me that she just never thought that that would happen in her lifetime."

Born on April 18, 1926 in New York City as the youngest of three siblings, Hanover's father was an immigrant from Russia and her mother from England.

Her activism on civil rights causes, her friend Gerash said, was likely deeply rooted in her background.

"She comes from a working-class background," Gerash said. "She grew up in a background of class oppression, Jewish oppression, and it just naturally extended to her lesbian life and the oppression living as a lesbian in those

days, and so it was a natural thing."

In 1952, Hanover, as a member of the Communist Party in New York, came to Chicago with her then husband and son from another marriage to engage in organizing, her daughter said.

She fell away from the Communist Party, having become disillusioned with it for its failure to support efforts on fighting racism, according to a Windy City Times article.

"After she divorced my father she decided she wanted to gain more education, more power and become an attorney to be able to change things more within the system," Hanover's daughter Nancy said.

A graduate of The John Marshall Law School, Hanover began practicing law under the wing of Pearl M. Hart, who defended oppressed minority groups, said another of Hanover's friends, Chicago attorney William B. Kelley. He said Hanover subsequently opened her law practice by the name of Midwest Women's Legal Center.

In 1991, Hanover was inducted into the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame, which reported that Hanover's life involved a blend of skills and causes: "As an unflagging advocate for the rights and welfare of lesbians and gay males, she has used and taught us lessons derived from a history of labor organizing, leftist politics, feminism, cultural self affirmation, brotherhood, advocacy of racial justice and being a lawyer."

Her decades of involvement in Chicago's gay and wider communities, included her activism with numerous groups focused on civil liberties, feminist issues and racial justice issues.

Standing just slightly taller than 5 feet, "She had a commanding presence," Kelley said. "She was very quick to stand up for somebody she felt was being mistreated."

Cook County Circuit Judge Sebastian T. Patti, who became the second openly gay candidate to win a seat on the bench in Illinois in 1996, said of Hanover: "She was a real trailblazer in the legal community. Her sense of justice and fair play were widely known and greatly admired. ... All of us, and I mean all of us with a capital A were the beneficiaries of her compassion and her zealotry and her sense of fair play and justice."

In addition to her daughter, Hanover is survived by two sons, Stan Hanover and Paul Hanover; five grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

Hanover was preceded in death by her former partner, Dillie Grunauer, another Chicago activist.