

Jim Robinson took care of his friends—
and knew how to have fun

A Dance I'll Never Forget

From SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS
HILLARY HAUSER

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, I received an invitation to an important black-tie gala. I felt honored to be included, for among the guests were world-renowned orchestra conductors, important musicians and various patrons of the arts. I knew I'd have to find something appropriate to wear, but I had left this problem until the last minute.

Now I was in trouble. The day before the event, the stores where I live in Santa Barbara, Calif., were about to close. Hoping I could find what I needed in less than an hour, I was preparing to race out the door when my telephone rang.

"Yo, ho, ho, it's Uncle Weener calling!" came the familiar greeting. Jim Robinson, a sea urchin diver

who was a great friend, always announced himself that way. And though I never knew exactly why, he called himself Uncle Weener.

I explained why I couldn't talk for very long. "Wait!" he said. "I've got something for you to wear. It's perfect. Guaranteed. I'll be right over."

Whenever Uncle Weener gave commands like that, a person listened. That's because he always considered his friends' problems to be his own, and he cared very much about coming up with real solutions.

Twenty minutes later he arrived—a tall, lanky man whose wild, curly blond hair looked as if it had never been touched by a comb. He was holding a brand-new tuxedo he had bought for a small fortune and worn

only once. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen—a black jacket in the recess of a cabinet, a pair of elegant silk trousers, a crisp white shirt, a bow tie and a belt with an expensive silver buckle.

"Here!" he commanded. "Try it on."

I am a tall woman, but to be offered this suit of men's clothes was a pretty wild idea. It was also one of the most loving gestures I'll ever received from a friend. I don't know many people who willingly lend their expensive evening clothes to others.

Minutes later I had on Jim's tuxedo. He adjusted the bow tie, then asked me to put on earrings and a pair of high heels. Looking into a mirror, I thought I looked sensational—but still felt uncertain. "You don't think I look like a man?" I asked.

"No!" he insisted. He went to the CD player, put on a recording of Tom Waits singing "Invitation to the Blues" and then invited me to dance. We swayed around the living room until we heard the lyrics "And you feel just like Cagney, she looks like Rita Hayworth, at the corner of the Schwarz's Drug Store." We fell apart laughing, which put the final stamp of approval on the scheme.

I went to the gala, and to this day people still talk about what I wore. Among my favorite photographs is one of me sitting next to a great orchestra conductor who was wearing the exact same thing as I. The photograph is a reminder of

Uncle Werner's generosity and his insistence on how beautiful and sentimental I would be at the ball.

I had met Uncle Werner by accident. My husband, a sea urban and absolute diver, was coming back from a fishing trip in 1986, and in the dark he hit something in the channel—perhaps a log. The boat began to take on water through the gaping hole in the stern.

Jim Robinson was on the scene quickly and owed him to shore. The immediacy of his actions saved my husband's boat and maybe even his life.

From that day forward, Werner became one of our dearest friends. At least once a week he would charge into our house, take a seat at my piano and play his heart out. At sea, Jim's boat was the center of action—Hotel Werner, the divers called it. At night other boats would tie up to Hotel Werner, and their occupants would bring out the barbecued and share food.

Jim was a unifying force, the one who kept up everyone's spirits. An energetic man, he loved the ocean and diving more than anything. When ever he was forced to stay out of the water because of illness or injury, he would become almost desperate: "The ocean is my life!" he would say. "I can't be anywhere but out there."

If I ever ran into rough waters, Werner would call me once or twice a day to see how I was doing. Actually he called all his close friends almost

(Continued on page 48C)

every day. "Yo, ho, ho," the message always began. "How are you? I care. I love you." He always said "I love you."

On December 3, 1994, Jim's roommate, Pam Schack, came over to visit me. While we were having lunch, another friend called to say she had heard that a sea weevil diver had been bitten by a shark. Pam and I thought, Oh, no, but we were sure it was no one we knew.

Pam and I finished lunch and then she left. Minutes later she called. "It's Jimmie!" she cried. "He's gone!" Receiving this news was like falling into quicksand, where words sit on the surface, then slowly sink into some ugly gurgling.

I raced down to the harbor to be with Pam and Jim's other friends. We found out that his boat, the *Florentia Marie*, had anchored off the west end of San Miguel Island. Jim had gone into the water with his dive scooter to survey the area. No one knows how deep he went, but when he came to the surface, he got a hand on the transom and said, "White shark! I got hit by a white shark."

Two fellow crew members, Ward Meyer and Steve Stickney, pulled him up and applied resuscitators anywhere they could. With their hands they tried to stop the bleeding from his mangled legs. Despite their efforts, he stopped breathing minutes later.

As there the next morning, my husband and I got out of bed, neither of us able to sleep. In the dark

we went to the piano and quietly began to sing a Tom Waits ballad called "On the Nickel." When we got to the words "What becomes of all the little boys, who never comb their hair?" we broke down and cried.

No one in the Santa Barbara harbor will ever forget Jim's funeral or the line of people outside the church. As the minister read a passage from Ecclesiastes—"... a time to be born, a time to die..."—a phone rang. Many people laughed, and I'm sure we were all drinking the same thing: it was as if Uncle Werner were calling once again, to say nothing more than, "Yo, ho, ho! How are you? I love you."

Then came the spreading of ashes from the *Florentia Marie*, with 36 hours following Jim's boat out to sea, and the flares and gun salutes that could be seen for miles.

Since then I have learned that my story of the tuxedo is not so unusual. It turns out that many people have a tale to tell about Uncle Werner's unbridled, no-serifs-attached friendship. He went to bat for those who had no one else on their side. He was a father figure to divers getting started in the business. He loaned money even when he was low on funds himself. When he did have money, he insisted on giving it away, buying gifts for others and throwing parties for his friends. And he never asked for anything in return.

What is the way to immortality? It is not through naming buildings or amazing fortunes. It is through

(Continued on page 48D)

A DANCE I'LL NEVER FORGET

simple acts of kindness, of putting someone else's needs before your own. When buildings have crumbled and fortunes have been spent, love and selfless acts of caring live on.

The deeds of Jim Robinson continue to guide the friends who still think about him. *What would Uncle Bremer do in this situation?* we ask ourselves. Maybe I shouldn't be so stingy, maybe I should take more

time to tell someone I care, maybe I should organize some fun for everybody, maybe I should live a little more!

When I think of Uncle Bremer, I think of a life lived deeply and filled with unconditional loving. But what I cherish the most is the memory of watching his beautiful tuxedo and swaying around the living room. It's a dance I'll never forget.

