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A TRIBUTE TO THE LATE JOEL BLOOM

HON. LUCILLE ROYBAL-ALLARD
OF CALIFORNIA
IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

FRIDAY, AUGUST 3, 2007

Ms. ROYBAL-ALLARD. Madam Speaker, I rise today to recognize the late Joel Bloom, a beloved community leader, activist and business owner in my district, who passed away recently after a long battle with cancer.

At a memorial service last month held in front of Joel's business, Bloom's General Store in the Arts District, more than 200 admirers, family members and friends gathered to celebrate his remarkable life. It was a happy occasion, just as Joel would have wanted.

On a personal level, I am extremely grateful to Joel for his unwavering advocacy on behalf of the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority's (MTA) Edward R. Roybal Metro Gold Line Eastside Extension. Joel knew that the Gold Line light-rail extension linking Union Station to destinations that included the Arts District and East Los Angeles would play a critical role in the economic development of much-neglected communities. At many MTA meetings when the extension was discussed, I

could always count on Joel to represent the transportation needs of Arts District residents with passion and zeal. It saddens me that Joel will not be with us to ride the trains when rail service begins in late 2009 that he fervently believed would spur economic development similar to what occurred in his Chicago birthplace.

Madam Speaker, in honor of Joel's life and many accomplishments, I would like to submit for the record his obituary that appeared in *The Los Angeles Times* on July 14. It captures the many facets of a man who will be greatly missed by all who knew and loved him.

Joel Bloom, 59; L.A. Arts District Activist
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By Valerie J. Nelson

Joel Bloom, a pioneering community activist who helped shape the downtown Los Angeles arts district and was its unofficial mayor, with his shoebox-sized general store serving as the area's town hall, has died. He was 59.

Bloom, who also was a playwright and actor, died of soft-tissue sarcoma Friday at the West Los Angeles VA Medical Center, said his son, Randy. Bloom had fought cancer since 2000.

“He gave the arts district its personality, and

he was unabashed in his great love for it," said Councilwoman Jan Perry, who represents the area sandwiched between Little Tokyo and the banks of the Los Angeles River. "Joel was charismatic and ruled the roost over there for many, many years."

In late June, the city gave him an honor rarely accorded a living Angeleno – a sign was posted at East Third Street and Traction Avenue that declared the area "Joel Bloom Square."

The humble Bloom's General Store, founded in 1994 to give the growing community a place to pick up toothpaste or rent a video, stands nearby.

"There's a spark here – hopefully we can light it," Bloom told *The Times* in 1994 before opening the store in the industrial corridor.

The downtown arts district began in the late 1970s as a haven for artists who worked in the lofts and often illegally lived in them.

By the time Bloom moved there in 1986, the city had legalized the live-work spaces, and hundreds of artists had flocked to the area then known as the warehouse or lofts district.

"I get a feeling here I haven't gotten anywhere else. It may look desolate, but it's not. There's no place I'd rather be," Bloom said in the 1994 article.

A City Council resolution passed earlier this month recognized Bloom's community activism, which encompassed fighting to bring light-rail projects to downtown neighborhoods, advocating for affordable housing, organizing a well-regarded neighborhood watch program and leading downtown neighborhood councils.

The resolution also saluted him as a lifelong baseball fan and as a member of the Second City improv group "who raised the term 'grumpiness' to an art form."

Offstage, he was seen as equally cantankerous.

"He was a very gruff old man," said Edward Walker, a longtime friend who works at Bloom's store. "He could yell at you one moment, but the next he would be your friend. Still, if you needed something, he would be the first one there."

Bloom reveled in being a character, friends said, and in creating them.

In 1987, Bloom wrote and staged a production in a downtown parking lot that spoofed drive-in movies. Patrons were handed 2-D glasses – the wearer could see out of the left lens but not the right – and watched "Mayhem at the Mayfield Mall," a parody of sci-fi movies.

When the play was restaged in 1998, *The Times* reported, the Drive-In Drama lot on Imperial Street was thought to be the only venue where live theater could be enjoyed from the comfort of an automobile. Audience members honked to signal laughs or boos, and the national media tweaked L.A. for redefining "car culture."

A Bloom musical, "Showdown at Sonoratown: The Lady Who Stole Hollywood," satirized Los Angeles history when the play was performed in 1990 on Hewitt Street at Al's Bar, which turned into Al's National Theater on slow nights.

As an actor, Bloom appeared in plays such as "The Juke Box Never Plays the Songs You Want to Hear," a takeoff on "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in which the audience sat on

stage and the action unfolded on the floor of Al's, said TK Nagano, Bloom's bookkeeper and friend.

Away from the stage, Bloom burnished his reputation as "the godfather" of the community of 1,500 by helping to spearhead a campaign that resulted in the city officially designating it in the 1990s as the arts district, Walker said.

Bloom also led the successful fight to keep the Los Angeles Unified School District from building a distribution warehouse in the neighborhood. In 2000, the Southern California Institute of Architecture moved into the area instead.

"Without Joel, we wouldn't have an arts district in its present form," Walker said. "It's kind of a Mayberry filled with bohemian artists. Everyone knows everybody, and everyone knows Joel."

The second of three children, Joel Alan Bloom was born May 30, 1948, in Chicago. His father worked for a paper company.

In 1969, he graduated from Pasadena Playhouse's school of theater arts.

During the Vietnam War, Bloom served in the Air Force, documenting the soldiers' daily life on film and from the air.

After leaving the service in 1974, he earned a degree in psychology from the University of Illinois, then joined Second City as a stage manager in Chicago.

In the late 1970s, he moved to Los Angeles along with Second City comedian George Wendt, with whom he roomed in Chicago.

Bloom bartended at Al's, joined Shakespeare Festival/LA as stage manager and put down roots in what would become the arts district.

"We've always been dismissed as that industrial area east of downtown," Bloom told *The Times* in 1997. "Well, we're more than that. There's a heart here. And a soul."

The corner of Traction Avenue and Hewitt Street came to be known as the heart of the community, the site of a scruffy general store where Bloom was known to greet customers by bellowing, "Whaddaya want?"

Bloom had been divorced since 1977. In addition to his son, Randy, of Azusa, he is survived by a brother, Michael; a sister, Lynn; and two grandchildren.