

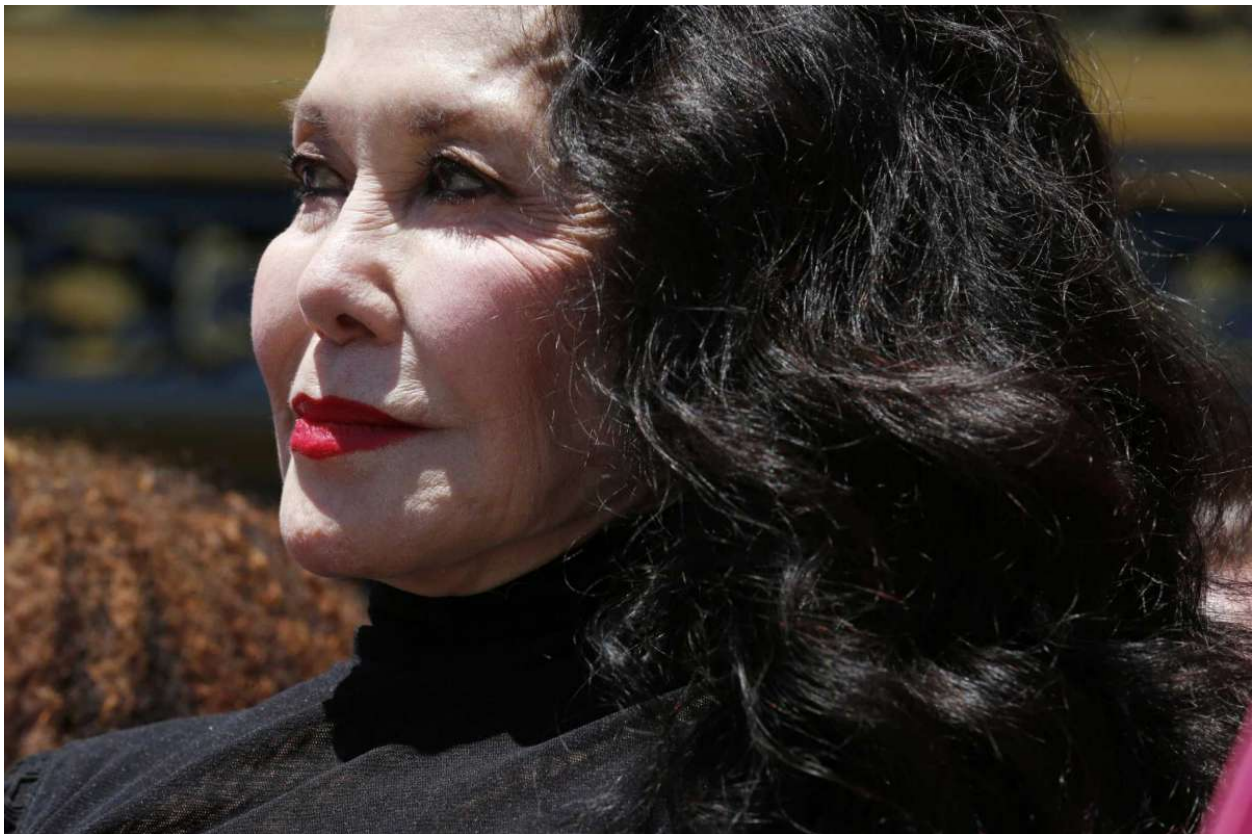
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Janice Mirikitani, Glide co-founder, activist and S.F. poet laureate, dies at 80

[Lauren Hernández](#), [Heather Knight](#)

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Janice Mirikitani, the co-founder San Francisco's Glide Memorial Church and foundation and the city's former poet laureate, died Thursday at age 80.

Janice Mirikitani, the co-founder of San Francisco's Glide Memorial Church and foundation and the city's former poet laureate, died Thursday. She was 80.

Glide confirmed Mirikitani's death in a message to supporters who were scheduled to attend a virtual justice event Thursday night, calling it "sad and sudden." They said she died early in the morning with family and friends at her side.

Mirikitani, the [poet laureate](#) in San Francisco from 2000 to 2002, used her poetry "to further the fight for equality and to call for a more just and peaceful world," Mayor London Breed said in a statement Thursday.

In her work at Glide with her husband, the Rev. Cecil Williams, Breed said, Mirikitani served San Francisco's "most vulnerable residents for decades and provided a place of refuge and love for all."

“She was boundless in her energy and in her devotion to this City and to her fellow San Franciscans,” Breed said. “My heart goes out to her friends and family, especially to Cecil. She was loved and will never be forgotten.”

As a third-generation Japanese American, she survived World War II internment camps, grew up in Petaluma and Los Angeles, and co-founded Glide, an organization that has worked for decades to combat systemic inequities and create pathways for people experiencing poverty. When she was an infant in 1941, her family was forced off their Stockton farm and sent to an internment camp in rural Arkansas. She was 3 years old when her family was freed.

She was known for her warm, contagious laugh and energy while working in the community. Mirikitani wrote books of poetry and led poetry classes for survivors of incest, of which she was also a survivor.

Del Seymour, the founder of Code Tenderloin, said he had been friends with Mirikitani for 28 years and considered her a sister. He called her “the first lady of the Tenderloin.”

Mirikitani ran programs at Glide for women who survived abuse, Seymour said, as well as recovery programs for people addicted to drugs in the Tenderloin.

“She stood up for these women in the community big-time,” he said. “She was a strong woman. You couldn’t play with her. If you needed help, you were going to get help. She steered so many people into recovery, it’s unbelievable.”

Lydia Bransten, the director of the Gubbio Project, which provides church space for people experiencing homelessness to sleep during the day, said Mirikitani influenced the entire nonprofit community.

“She was a compass for how to love without judgment,” Bransten said. “Her teachings were like a ripple in the community that taught and inspired us all.”

Lateefah Simon, a member of the BART Board of Directors, first met Mirikitani in the mid-1990s at a Board of Supervisors meeting about young mothers. Simon was a young single mother herself and ran the Center for Young Women’s Development in the Tenderloin. She recalled Mirikitani approaching her after the meeting and asking, “Do you go to church?” She didn’t, but started attending Glide after that meeting — and even gives a sermon there once a year now.

Later, Glide helped Simon’s dad, who was homeless and struggling with addiction, get housed and into recovery. He died five years ago, Simon said, “in that hotel with complete dignity in his own beautiful space.”

“I’ve been crying for two hours — I am heartbroken,” Simon said. “You just think that Cecil and Janice are going to live forever. They’re like the parents of consciousness in our city — of grace and clarity — and they’ve raised so many of us in this movement. If there is a heaven, she got an express elevator there.”

Simon added, “Glide is the North Star for my people. ... We just lost one of our giants.”

Paul Harkin worked as Glide’s harm reduction manager for 10 years starting in 2010 and took over the HIV program Mirikitani founded.

“Her sense of humor was wicked,” he said. “She had some unpredictability. She didn’t feel like she had to play the poet waif under the lightning rod presence of Cecil Williams. She didn’t hide in the shadows. She had her own platform, and there was an incredible chemistry between both of them. The two together were bigger than each one individually.”

State Sen. Scott Wiener of San Francisco said Thursday that Mirikitani was “one of the most exceptional human beings I’ve ever met, combining strength and love like no one else.”

“My condolences to the love of her life — Rev. Cecil Williams — to the entire Glide community, and to all of San Francisco,” Wiener said. “This is a huge loss for our community.”

In “keeping with Janice’s wishes,” Glide President and CEO Karen Hanrahan said, the nonprofit has established a [memorial fund](#) in her name to support women’s and children’s programs at Glide.

“Janice co-created so much of the early vision and the roots of Glide’s impact,” Hanrahan said. “She took deep pride in serving the most marginalized communities, including support for women and children, education, recovery, primary and mental health care, job training and housing.”

Williams, Hanrahan said, “is being held with love and support in this sensitive and difficult time.”

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