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ON THE WEB



Photo by Lisa Chamberlain

Party guests who gathered in honor of Living With Legends, the hotel's new blog.

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Chelsea

A Year in the Life

By LISA CHAMBERLAIN

THIS is the building in which Dylan Thomas collapsed after his last, fatal drinking binge in 1953, the place in which Sid Vicious's companion, Nancy Spungen, was fatally stabbed in 1978, and the site of any number of less famous suicides, murders, drug overdoses and fires over the 101 years that the Chelsea has been a residential hotel, billing itself as "a rest stop for rare individuals."

It was also in an apartment at the Hotel Chelsea that Thomas Wolfe wrote his last novel, "You Can't Go Home Again," which was published posthumously in 1940.

Wolfe's former apartment was subsequently divided into two suites — Room 829, which is occupied by Julia Calfee, a photographer, and Room 831, which is rented to short-term guests. And it was in Room 829 that a dozen longtime hotel residents, a few short-timers and a handful of outsiders gathered on a recent Saturday night to celebrate the first anniversary of Living With Legends, a blog started by a writer couple, Debbie Martin and Ed Hamilton, who have lived at the hotel for more than a decade.

Ms. Martin got the idea of a blog about the Chelsea after a fire on the ninth floor forced about 100 of the hotel's residents to evacuate their rooms. As guests began streaming in to the party, Ms. Martin recalled the moment: "We were hanging out in the lobby sharing a bottle of wine that was being passed around, and watching the parade of characters while Stanley Bard was running around, yelling about the hotel's more glamorous days." Mr. Bard is the hotel's longtime owner and manager.

As Ms. Martin was talking, her husband jumped into the story with an imitation of Mr. Bard, who makes frequent appearances on the blog, where he resembles the Don Knotts character on "Three's Company": a goofy, paternalistic landlord who simultaneously condemns and tolerates his tenants' eccentric ways.

" [Mark Twain](#), Sarah Bernhardt — important people lived here,' " said Mr. Hamilton, waving his arms around and stamping his feet. " 'Now it's just crazies who want to burn the place down!' "

The couple had long been aware that their neighbors, not to mention their landlord, were an unusual bunch. But not until this general impression came into sharper focus the night of the fire did Ms. Martin decide it would be interesting to chronicle the hotel's inner workings, which in her opinion could be done only in blog form because there is no narrative. It's just the daily life of people who can't go home again.

At first, her husband wasn't interested in contributing. "I kept telling Debbie: 'I'm writing a novel. I can't waste time on a blog,' " he said. But it turned out that his "Slice of Life" postings about some of the hotel's colorful though not famous tenants turned out to be the blog's most popular items. Although Mr. Hamilton is still writing a novel, he has become addicted to capturing the Chelsea's dark and quirky side.

"You send stuff out to magazines, months go by, and you never get any feedback," he said. "With the blog, you get instant gratification."

Mr. Hamilton paused and added: "Not everyone with a creative dream can be a success. That's really what Living With Legends is about."

The lucky few guests who have realized their creative dreams were the ones mostly in attendance at the party. Among them was the pianist and composer Gerald Busby, who celebrated his 70th birthday at Carnegie Hall in December with a concert of his more recent works, all of them composed from the Chelsea, where he has lived for the past 29 years.

"One night in 1980, I think it was, I was chatting with my neighbor across the hall," Mr. Busby recalled. "He was just standing around drinking a beer and we were talking, when the police stormed in and arrested him. I found out later he had just shot his wife."

Also among the guests were Mia Hanson and Hawk Alfredson, a couple who moved to New York in September 2001. On Sept. 11, they talked to Mr. Bard about moving into

the Chelsea permanently; they did so the following month. And like everyone who lives at the Chelsea, they have a story.

"A guy on the fifth floor, a hypoglycemic, went crazy one day," said Mr. Alfredson, a painter who has hung more than 40 of his dark, magical-realist paintings in the hotel's hallways. "He had an X-acto knife and was slashing paintings, including several of mine. Two days later, he came to his senses and apologized. Stanley told him had to leave, but let him stay until he found something else. That's Stanley."

As the final guests were cleaning up after the party, the woman staying in Room 831 returned from an evening out and invited everyone to see the other half of Thomas Wolfe's apartment. Painted in bright red and gold with an abstract painting over the bed, the room was strikingly different from Ms. Calfee's, whose white walls are covered with large-format black-and-white portrait photographs that she has been taking of Chelsea residents over the past three years.

Fresh glasses of wine were being poured in Room 831 when Ms. Martin and Mr. Hamilton began talking excitedly about what looked like a child's paint-chipped drawing table. "That's Charles James's drafting table," Ms. Martin said. "He was a fashion designer who lived here in the 60's."

When she wrote about the party on Living With Legends, Ms. Martin added a few more details: "Readers of the blog know that, not having enough room, we set this table out many years ago, with a note attached describing what it was. We've been wondering ever since who might have retrieved it, and now we know: Stanley Bard! He has it nailed into a bookshelf, so no one else can ever again throw it in the trash."