

Cultural Daily

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Eddie Gasporra—A Good Neighbor

Eric · Wednesday, January 27th, 2016

Some people say, “Good fences make good neighbors.” I like to say, “You’re lucky if you find a good neighbor.” Especially a good next door neighbor. Especially one who’s lived in the neighborhood longer than you have. One who will keep an eye on your dog when you leave town for a couple of weeks. And especially one who has fought Emile Griffith, ex-Middleweight Champion of the World.

There he is. Gravel voice. Boxer’s pug face. One eye. Laugh like a happy machine gun. Eddie “El Gato” Gasporra. Echo Park resident since ‘81. Or was it ‘85? Or ‘89? He’s not so clear about it these days. But he’s sitting on “his” bench in Elysian Park in the Marion Harlow Memorial Garden, just beneath the Atwater property at the northeast end of Park Drive. Eddie’s got his dogs with him, Lucky, Nano, & Glory, who have replaced Randy, Girlie, and Duke over the years. Eddie’s been sitting here every day holding court with his neighbors, who like to refer to him as “The Mayor of Elysian Park”.



Eddie’s a neighborhood kinda guy. Friendly, smart-ass, mouth like a sewer. A people person. Over the 22 years that I’ve lived in the hood, I’ve gotten to know him a bit. He was born in 1935 and grew up in Huntington Park, always defending the underdog ever since elementary and high school. With his fists. Maybe that’s how he became a professional boxer in the late 1950s, first a flyweight, and then lightweight, trained by Joe Frazier’s trainer, Eddie Futch, managed by the infamous Jackie McCoy, fighting at the legendary Hollywood Legion on El Centro just south of Hollywood Boulevard.



One of six boys and a girl, his mother was born in El Paso, Texas, his father, the macho patriarch of the family “who never spared the rod”, in Chihuahua, Mexico. The family moved to Watts during Eddie’s teenage years, but Eddie’s older brother still drove him to Huntington Park High, where Eddie was the football team’s galloping halfback and twice class president. He was also the “black sheep” of the family, when he dabbled in weekend lunch room burglary and once even punched out his choir teacher. Eddie sang second tenor.

After putting Julian Velasquez into a one day coma in the ring, Eddie lost his next three fights... along with his passion for professional boxing... and in 1959 he joined the Teamsters. First he worked the docks, then trucked, and then eventually became the notorious Danny DeVito-like dispatcher for “Los Animales”, the rough and ready Montebello truckers of Local Teamsters 208.



It was 1970, during the wildcat Teamsters strike, when Eddie met Alana, a 23 year old UCLA SDS student, on the strike line. Pumped up by strike line adrenaline, as he was being hauled off to jail in Ventura, Eddie managed to ask Alana for her phone number. Days later, he called her right after

his release and was surprised to find the phone number “actually real”.

Eddie’d been married twice before, father of Eddie Junior from the first marriage, father of Tony and Robin from the second. Alana had always been attracted to boxers, and as soon as she heard Eddie’s deep guttural intonations *en Español*, she was hooked. They moved in together in 1970, and they found their “little bungalow with rustic charm” towards the top of Lucretia Avenue in Echo Park in 1981. Or was it ’85? Or ’89. Neither can remember, but they’ve been here ever since. After 32 years, Eddie retired from the Teamsters in 1991, and Alana recently retired from her elementary school teacher’s job at LAUSD. They liked to go to Pizza Buona on Sunset and Alvarado once a week for authentic Italian food (just closed due to gentrification!), and to Barragan’s on Sunset, just east of Echo Park, for the best Mexican *comida* in town (closed a year ago due to gentrification).

Eddie liked to meet his Mexican “homies” most mornings at the donut shop in the mini mall at Echo Park and Montana, and the homies would greet him with a welcoming “Don Gasporra.” Eddie liked it that way because he was a big fan of the *Godfather* movies, and what better way to show “a little respect” for a man who stood up for his neighbors, than with a Don Corleone-like salutation.



You used to be able to sit down with the friendly enforcer every day, sitting on “his” bench in the Marion Harlow Memorial Garden in Elysian Park, with his dogs Lucky, Girlie, and Duke. But on this last Tuesday, January 19th, 2016, Eddie passed away due to complications from a stroke. It wasn’t sudden. He had been having a lot of health issues lately and no longer met the guys at the donut shop or walked the dogs. It was sad to see his decline.



But look at that mug. Ain’t that a face you could love. Or at least hear a few good stories from.

I used to see and hear his family come over every few Sundays, sit in the sort of run-down front yard, pop open a few beers, and just hang. They always said hello, and I always greeted them back. Why not, Eddie was my neighbor. My good neighbor.

R.I.P. Eddie Gasporra 1935-2016

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