OBITUARY

Barnich, former judge considered a gay ‘trailblazer’

By ALLAN TURNER
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Houston AIDS activist and former Municipal Court Judge John Paul Barnich, the first openly gay man to become a city court judge in Texas, died Monday from diabetes-related illness. He was 63.

Appointed to the court by then-Mayor Lee Brown in 1999, Barnich served as a judge until October 2007, when failing health led him to resign. He served as a part-time adjudication hearing officer, specializing in parking and red light camera cases, until his death.

“He was a wonderful, kind person. A character. He had a sense of humor that to me was very unique,” said presiding Municipal Court Judge Berta Mejia. “He was very thoughtful. He will be missed.”

Mejia said Barnich’s community involvement — he was a former board chairman of Houston AIDS Foundation Inc. — and his work in juvenile cases as a lawyer enhanced his stature as a judge.

State District Judge Steven Kirkland, a one-time city court judge who also is gay, called him a “trailblazer.”

“I was lucky to follow him,” said Kirkland.

Santa Claus lookalike

Barnich, friends and associates recalled Tuesday, was an empathetic man with a wry sense of humor. Increasingly hobbled by his illness, Barnich sometimes admitted to friends, “Well, I guess my days of dancing with the Bolshoi are over.”

“He was a round, jolly-looking fellow with long white hair and beard,” Kirkland said.

“Occasionally he would look at defendants from the bench and say, ‘Who do you think I am, Santa Claus?’” Defendants invariably would be taken aback because of the resemblance, Kirkland said.

When questioned during a City Council hearing to confirm his appointment about how a gay judge would differ from a heterosexual judge, he responded that he would upgrade the courtroom’s sound system in order to play show tunes. On the occasion of his pet iguana’s fifth birthday, he gave the reptile a party featuring a mariachi band, said his longtime friend Jennifer Rantz.

Barnich arrived in Houston in 1969 with a psychology degree from Michigan State University, finding employment as a teacher with the Houston Independent School District. He partnered with the FBI to create a criminal justice program at Waltrip High School — an effort that evolved into what is now HISD’s High School for Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice.
In 1977, he spent six months studying comparative religion in India as a Fulbright scholar. He graduated from South Texas College of Law in 1980.

**A bear against HIV bias**


“It’s very, very personal to me,” Barnich told the author of a study of the disease’s impact on American life. “I tend to react to people who discriminate against people based on their HIV status like a wounded mother grizzly protecting her cubs. ... I see my job as making it as costly as possible for them.”

Houston gay activist Ray Hill recalled first meeting Barnich — a man he affectionately called “Jumbo” — as the lawyer mowed the lawn of an HIV-positive man. “I told him I really appreciated him volunteering, and he responded that he actually was the chairman of the board.”

Hill described Barnich as a man with “enormous capacity for empathy.”

“He absorbed the pain of others and gave those parts back in better condition,” Hill said.

Added Houston lawyer Phyllis Frye, “John Paul broke the glass ceiling for out-of-the-closet GLBT judges in Harris County, and he was a sweet person to know.”

Survivors include two brothers, Bill Barnich III and Rick Barnich, and two sisters, Mary Barnich and Martha Jo Vanderberg.

His funeral is scheduled for 1 p.m. Saturday at the Rothko Chapel.

allan.turner@chron.com