March 25, 2009

B.C. resident 'lived like an artist'

City remembers 80-year-old J. Kline Hobbs after his death

A bit of what is unique about Battle Creek will be buried Thursday.

Graveside services will be held at 11 a.m. at Oak Hill Cemetery for J. Kline Hobbs and a memorial service will be held in May.

The 80-year-old playwright and poet was found dead March 14 in his north side home. He suffered from heart disease for years.

He lived for the arts.

"He lived like an artist," said friend Diane Dickey. "He wasn't an artist on the side while he worked third shift. If he didn't make money as an artist, he was poor."

Born in Battle Creek to a plumber father and nurse mother, Hobbs graduated from Michigan State University in language and literature and Columbia University in English drama and dramatic arts.

He lived in New York City for five years in the 1950s after college, but returned to Battle Creek, repulsed by the city's crime.

He cared for his parents until his father died in 1983 and his mother in 1986 and then lived alone, but always writing plays and poems and supporting the arts.

He wrote plays for regional theaters, but said in a 1977 interview that few were interested in original works. However, he found work acting, directing and producing projects and publishing poetry and was, for a time, artist in residence at both Olivet College and Kalamazoo College and did some teaching.

He earned a second master's degree in library science at Western Michigan University.

Dickey attended arts events with Hobbs and they had long telephone conversations.

"He would spin one story into another without a break and only he knew the connections," she said. Once, she didn't interrupt, and he talked for 90 minutes.

"He was unique and he was different," said Sue Wiegand, a neighbor who has known Hobbs about six years and attended neighborhood planning council meetings with him. She took him shopping to Horrocks once a week.

"He was intelligent and he could talk about anything," she said, "but he could put people off because he was different and people like sameness and familiarity."

Hobbs was openly gay, Dickey said. "He was openly gay at a time when it wasn't popular, but more important for him was to be an artist."
"He had wonderful clothes," Wiegand said, "and he never threw clothes away. He was a peacock and he enjoyed looking nice. He was a very proud man and you could see that in his appearance and in his dress."

Although he had owned cars and a bicycle, Hobbs for the last several years walked or accepted rides to move around town.

Tall and thin, he stood straight.

"Everyone has seen him around town," Dickey said.

In 1980, he wrote in a biographical piece submitted to the Enquirer that "My poetry and plays focus on the problems of self acceptance and love between men and women, men and men and women and women."

And in an interview in 1977, Hobbs told the paper's arts reporter Nancy Crawley that his job as a poet is to inflict unwanted truths.

"You can't be a great writer unless you tell society something it doesn't want to know."

Dickey and Wiegand believe Hobbs influenced young people and his differences have been good for the city.

"Battle Creek doesn't have enough eccentric people," Dickey said. "He was good for Battle Creek."

"He never lived his life with regret," Wiegand said. "He walked the path that was in front of him."

Trace Christenson can be reached at 966-0685 or tchrist@battlecr.gannett.com.