Jim Nickoff - helped gay rights groups keep finances in order
Wyatt Buchanan, Chronicle Staff Writer
Saturday, January 5, 2008

Jim Nickoff, who was key in the financial success of gay civil rights organizations and several political campaigns, died at his ranch in Woodside on Dec. 16. He was 44 years old.

Mr. Nickoff was a founding board member of Equality California, one of the most successful state gay rights organizations in the country, and worked hundreds of hours to set up and oversee the group's accounting system, said Geoff Kors, executive director of Equality California.

In the five years that Mr. Nickoff worked with the organization, its budget grew from about $180,000 to just under $4 million, Kors said.

"The term I use about Jim is that he is one of those unsung heroes. He really put together and ran the financial pieces that are so important in these movements," Kors said.

Mr. Nickoff was born and raised in Lansing, Mich. He attended Michigan State University and earned a bachelor's degree in accounting in 1987, according to his friends. That was the same year he moved to San Francisco, said Thom Lynch, a close friend and former executive director of the San Francisco Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Community Center.

Lynch first met Mr. Nickoff in 1996 when the two worked at Project Open Hand, an organization that provides meals for people with HIV/AIDS.

Mr. Nickoff had a special sensitivity for social outsiders, Lynch said, and often that manifested in his adopting abandoned animals.

After Hurricane Katrina, Lynch and Mr. Nickoff visited Cuba, where many dogs were abandoned in the wake of the storm. Mr. Nickoff grew attached to one destitute street dog that the locals called "Sarna," which is Spanish for scabies or mange.

"He grew attached to the dog, paid for veterinary care and then everybody started calling it 'Elian,' " said Lynch, a reference to Elian Gonzalez, the young Cuban boy who became the
center of an international custody battle that involved the U.S. and Cuban governments in 2000.

Mr. Nickoff was unable to bring the dog back to the United States from Cuba, but rescued two dogs while on a different trip to Australia, Lynch said.

In addition to the gay rights work - including financial positions with the National Task Force on AIDS Prevention, the Federation of Gay Games and the Harvey Milk LGBT Democratic Club - Mr. Nickoff served as treasurer or in other financial capacities on the election campaigns of politicians including Sen. Barbara Boxer, former Supervisor Angela Alioto and Assemblyman Mark Leno, those close to him said.

"He had an uncommonly passionate commitment and dedication to community service," said Leno, D-San Francisco. "I was honored that he offered me his service in a couple of my campaigns."

Mr. Nickoff also had three martial arts black belts and won medals at the 1994, 1998 and 2002 Gay Games, according to his friends.

He is survived by his partner, Dave Lawson of Woodside. The two men were the seventh couple married at San Francisco City Hall in February 2004.

A memorial service is scheduled for Jan. 26 at 11 a.m. at Hapkido USA, 603 Taraval St., in San Francisco, where he taught martial arts to young people.

Donations in Mr. Nickoff's name can be made to the Jim Nickoff Student Internship fund, care of the Equality California Institute, 2370 Market St., San Francisco, CA 94114.