

Remembering Vi Landry

1974 — 2008

Janet

2008



Vi Landry (1974 — 2008)

“What have you done for New Orleans? What separates you from the tourists who come down here, party, maybe absorb a little culture and leave, besides the length of your stay?” Vi Landry asked me these difficult questions with her characteristic unflinching gaze as we sat in my kitchen during the spring of 2007, a year and a half after Hurricane Katrina.

She told me of her feeling of responsibility to the city and her anger at the indifferent populace she would soon face when she returned to NYU to finish journalism school. That afternoon, we considered our future in New Orleans, a city that, 18 months after the storm ran at 30%. A city where half our neighbors could not return. Where opportunistic -landlords had nearly doubled rents. Where opportunistic young people supplemented their lack of income with frequent muggings. Where we must constantly keep our guards up. Where, a few weeks earlier, a stranger had broken into a mutual friend’s home and murdered her.

Vi Landry, the first person to whom I admitted I didn’t know how much longer I could stay. Vi Landry, who looked me in the eye and demanded an answer. What had I done for this city that had given me so much? Vi was very much a child of New Orleans and had a native’s pride and defensiveness. She loved her city and embodied much of its charm. She took her revelry seriously, considered costume excellence a necessity, and made the best king cake I’ve ever tasted. Though she knew how to have a good time, she was not distracted by the party and worked harder than anyone I’ve met. In the winter of ’08, she came back to New Orleans to care for her father who was dying of cancer. He

died not long before carnival, yet Vi managed to make appearances at parties, worked diligently on art and plan-

ning for the Krewe of Eris and even bartended on Mardi Gras day. When asked how she did it, coming out in her time of grief, she said, "You have to live for the dead."

Little did we know we would need those words of advice a few short weeks later on February 18 when a driver asleep at the wheel hit Vi head on, killing her and her father's dog, Zeus, instantly. News of any death is shocking, but even more so in this case because Vi seemed so unstoppable. In her 33 years, she had done more than many people do in an entire lifetime.

Vi Landry: filmmaker, poet, artist, cook, gardener, clothes horse, intellectual diva, devoted friend. She taught English to Tibetan refugees in India, tutored high school students in New Orleans and taught the rest of us how to have the courage to be joyful in the face of grief. As a burgeoning member of the 4th estate, Vi was a journalist of the old school, determined to serve the people, not to serve them lies. An avowed anarchist, Vi used her vocation to critique the government and the corporations which write its policies.

The sight of Vi at a dinner party, potluck, show, or just a night at the bar promised an evening free from inordinate small talk. Brilliant and witty while trading news and anecdotes, she never lost sight of the big picture and would, at some point, bring the conversation around to the troubles at hand.

She was a warrior for our side. Outraged by injustice, ready for action, not content to wait and see. She fought hard, spoke the ugliest truths yet still saw the beauty in us and around us. She knew that unless we celebrate we have nothing to fight for. She demanded our best and to see that big toothy smile we worked hard to give it to her.

We, those of us who not only want to see an end to this unjust system but also want to create a vibrant, viable alternative, lost an ally that February morning. Those of us lucky enough to have Vi in our lives lost much, much more. Vi Landry, may the part of you that lives on in us help us meet your challenge. May we continue to ask the difficult questions. May we push ourselves to contribute, refuse to drop out, and work harder and harder to create lives worth fighting for.

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