

BENNETT HALL

Unlikely activist energizes clean up in the heart of Downtown

In his most imaginative eye, Bennett Hall never pictured himself as a civic activist. At root, he was an artist, a master of the photographic craft, who learned to become a businessman out of a necessity called survival. Left to himself, Hall might have been content capturing images of life through the prism of his lens or enhancing historical photographs through a process he had refined or producing large-scale, custom-framed lobby exhibits for his stable of corporate clients. That was Hall's business equation, and it offered him that beautiful balance between intimate involvement and ultimate detachment.

That was before Hall moved his studio showroom to Union Square, to a second-story space overlooking the Powell Street cable car turnaround, and came face-to-face with a reality that caused him to click and shudder.

It was the summer of 1991, at a point when Bennett Hall Images had outgrown the walls of its original headquarters on Army Street. With major new contracts in hand from the Hyatt Corporation and Charles Schwab, the time was ripe for a move. "Frankly, what attracted me to this spot was a really good deal on rent," said Hall of his spacious quarters above the Burger King at the foot of Powell Street, previously occupied by the Hatley-Martin Gallery.

"Moving here, my rent would be less than half what I was paying for a piece of industrial loft space in the Mission District. It seemed like an offer too good to refuse."

On the surface, the location appeared ideal. After all, we're talking about a hallowed strip of land, the launching pad from which the City's fabled cable cars climb halfway to the stars. But from the moment he arrived, Hall was confronted with a shocking discovery. "Coming to my place of business each morning, I'd find drunks passed out on my doorstep and the stench of urine heavy in the air. I could barely tell that the ground under my feet was made of brick, the layer of grime and gum and cigarette butts was so deep. I'd see all kinds of drug deals and organized scams going down on the street. On Christmas Day, I had to remove human feces from in front of my door to go up and get a gift I'd left there. It blew my mind. I never conceived that the human animal could sink to such a low state."

What's more, Hall had good reason to take the situation personally. "At the time, I was wearing Armani suits to work, so naturally I became a target. The street people messed with me like crazy. At least every other day I had to battle my way in here," Hall said. "Calling the police did no good. I'd wait for hours and they'd seldom come. As the months passed, I started get-

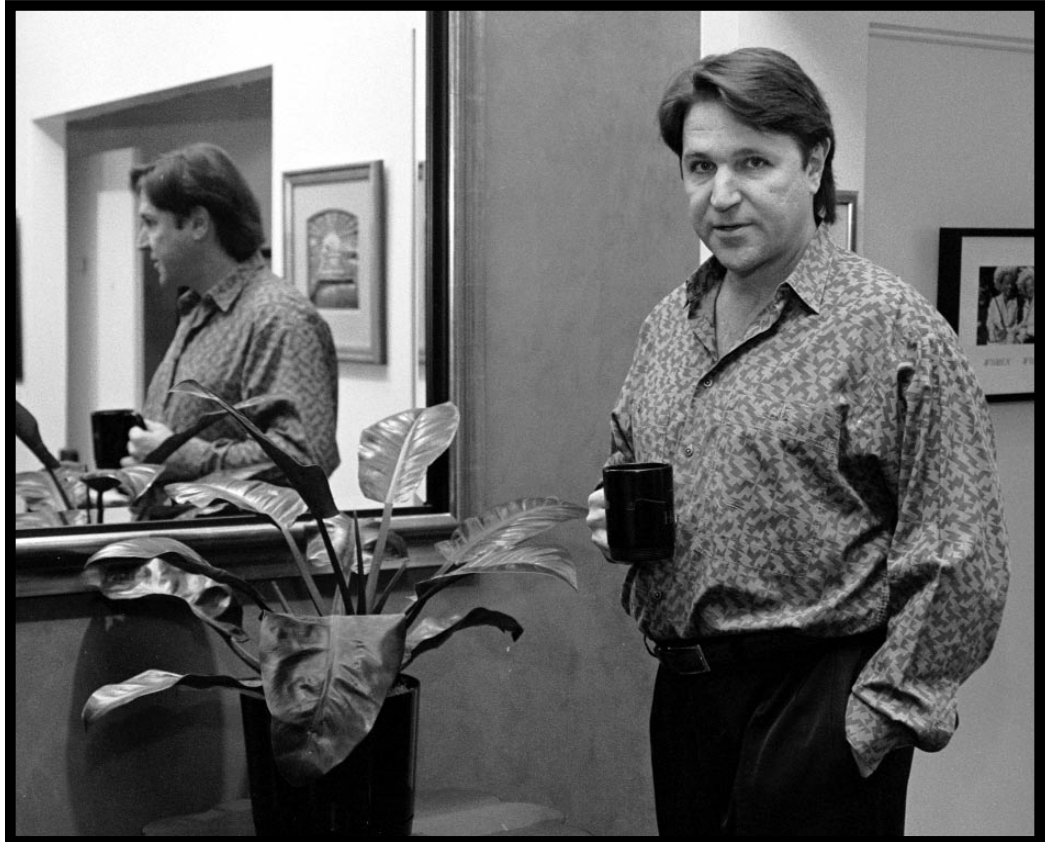


Photo by Mary Newton

Bennett Hall, leading the effort toward City Center improvement.

ting death threats on a regular basis. It wasn't until one day in self-defense I fought off a man who accosted me at my front door that there was a noticeable shift in my image on the streets. I guess they never thought I'd fight back."

Surviving the encounter, Hall came away with his perspective undeniably changed. "It was obvious that something had to be done about this situation. I wondered how 'they' could allow San Francisco's world-famous shopping corridor to become such a cesspool,

not knowing exactly who 'they' were," he recalled.

That was then. Now, six years later, the air around Powell Street is considerably fresher. The crime scene during the day has been reduced to sporadic incidents. A trained team of uniformed Ambassadors and street cleaners, some of whom are former homeless people, operates seven days a week with the goal of keeping the area safe, clean and friendly.

Hall is not totally responsible for the obvious changes that have taken place. But he was the start of it. And while others have played essential roles along the way, he's been the glue holding the effort together and continually nudging it forward. "What impressed me about Bennett from the start was his dedication to making a difference in this neighborhood when most people had basically given up," said Kevin Westlye, former director

of restaurant operations for the Kimpton Group, who teamed with Hall and Tom Raines of Nordstrom in creating the Powell Street Turnaround Association (PSTA) in 1992. "Bennett and I became friends through our common concerns, and I found him to be a natural leader, a visionary, with a gift for organizing people and the ability to stay focused on what is truly important."

A "determined optimist" by his own description, Hall set about trying to coalesce the diverse interests in the Union Square business district toward the common goal of improving the environment for everyone's benefit. "Kevin and I called for a public meeting of concerned citizens and held it in my showroom," said Hall. "We expected maybe 20 people would show up, but when we opened the doors, about 100 people jammed in here. It was obvious that a lot of people were fed up with the status quo."

"OVERNIGHT, DOZENS OF FULL-TIME SCAM ARTISTS WERE PUT OUT OF BUSINESS AND THE ATMOSPHERE AROUND HERE IMPROVED SIGNIFICANTLY," SAID HALL.

continues

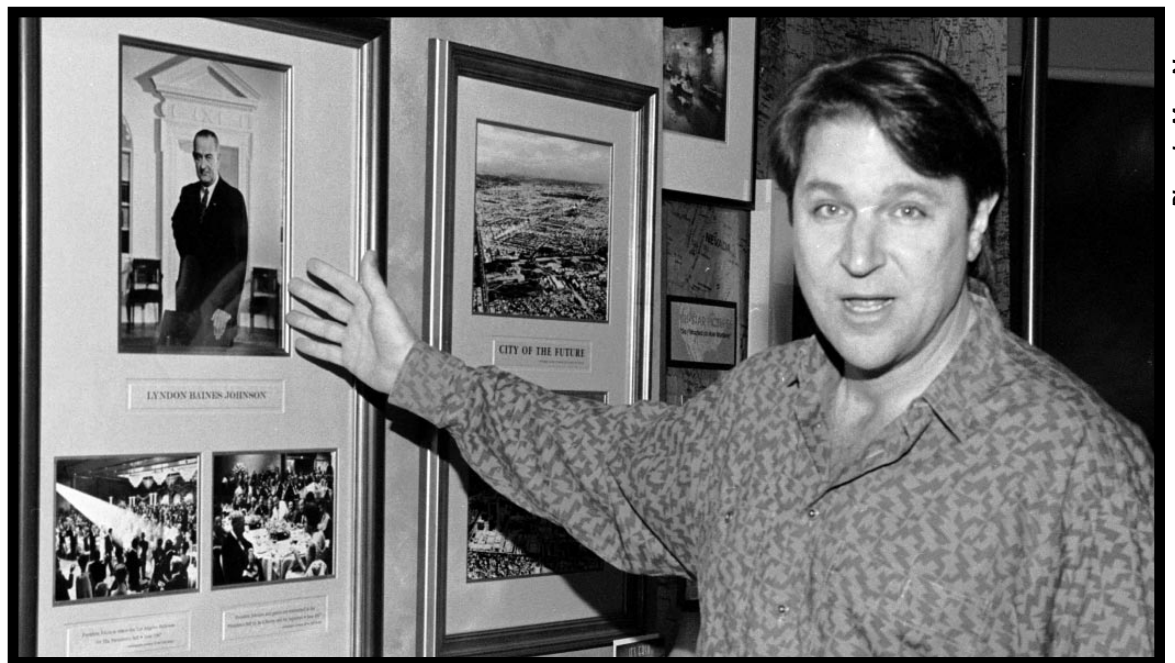
SAN FRANCISCO DOWNTOWN STANDOUTS

Those early meetings led to the formation of the PSTA, which made great strides from the get-go. "The biggest deterrent at the beginning was an organized gang of petty criminals who controlled Powell Street," Hall recalled. "They would approach unsuspecting passengers getting off the cable car and ask for their transfers, which they would then shuttle to the front of the line and resell. It was totally illegal, but they didn't care. They were making good money at it."

Wading through bureaucratic sludge, the PSTA was able to convince Muni to eliminate the transfer system and remove the cable car ticket machine from the turnaround. "Overnight, dozens of full-time scam artists were put out of business and the atmosphere around here improved significantly," said Hall.

Encouraged, the organization took further steps to bring Powell Street back to life. Funded by donations from some of the major businesses in the neighborhood—Nordstrom, the Kimpton Group, the Flood Corporation, the San Francisco Hilton and others—the PSTA contracted for extra police and security officers to patrol the area, brought in crews to steam clean the street and sidewalks, and worked closely with city agencies to improve services.

"Some of our greatest gains were made at the table in the middle of my showroom, where we brought business leaders together with police captains, and senior officials from Muni, BART, public works, city planning and the like," Hall said. "We'd sit here and hold powwows about how to make this neighborhood work. It opened the lines of communication and began the process of hands reaching out and shaking."



Bennett Hall during a tour of his studio.

Photo by Mary Newton

Eventually, the PSTA undertook the monumental effort of attempting to create a Business Improvement District (BID) at Union Square. "We realized that the way to generate long-term, dramatic impact was to form a BID, whereby business owners in a district agree to tax themselves on their real property. The money is collected by the City, then returned to a non-profit organization in the district where it is used to enhance the environment, and supplement city services," Hall

explained. "There are hundreds of successful BID programs in the country, everywhere from New York to Portland. BIDS offer an incredible opportunity for citizen empowerment."

Continued Hall, "PSTA helped craft local BID legislation with Supervisor Barbara Kaufman, who spearheaded the process. She succeeded a year ago in getting it passed by the Board of Supervisors and adopted into the City Charter. Now any neighborhood group in San Francisco has the right to form a BID."

Ultimately, after considerable effort to engender support from surrounding business owners, the petition drive fell short of the 51 percent of "dollar votes" needed to create a BID in the Union Square area. Disappointed, Hall refused to admit defeat. "I felt if it all died at that point, it wouldn't be resurrected for years, if at all," he said. "It was clear that we had a core of key supporters who were already willing to spend a certain amount each month to keep the area clean and safe. So I went back and asked them to contribute money to start a 'voluntary' BID."

His request met with receptive ears, and the checkbooks opened wide enough that on August 1, 1996, the new City Center Partnership was launched. Entirely self-funded, supported and managed by a volunteer Board of Directors headed by Hall, CCP was designed as a model program to show what could be accomplished if a full-scale BID existed at Union Square.

Currently, the CCP's eight-person team, clad in red jackets and white baseball caps, canvasses the area around Powell Street from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily. Among their wide range of functions, Ambassadors are on the streets to provide information and directions to tourists, deter aggressive panhandling, refer homeless people to shelters, and when problems arise, call for emergency or police assistance through CCP's centralized dispatch system. Meanwhile, CCP's sanitation crew performs early morning graffiti removal and sidewalk litter clean-up throughout the day.

Managing Director Karin Flood runs day-to-day operations, reporting directly to Hall. "I feel we've made a noticeable difference, especially along the Powell Street corridor, and a lot of the credit for it goes to Bennett," Flood said. "He's a non-traditional kind of guy. At first, he had a tendency to want to micromanage the operation. He wanted to oversee every detail."

ARE YOU IN PAIN?

I Can Help!

- CARPAL TUNNEL Syndrome
- COMPUTER Related Wrist and Arm Pain
- HEADACHES
- BACK PAIN
- NECK and SHOULDER PAIN



Dr. Elan Vitkoff, D.C.

Consultation, Examination & X-Rays (2 if needed) (\$205 value) **\$20**

The official Chiropractor of

24 HOUR FITNESS™

Gentle and Effective Treatment • Massage Therapist on staff

VITKOFF CHIROPRACTIC CLINICS

Hours: 9-2, 3-7 Convenient hours during lunch & evenings

SAN FRANCISCO

781-1131

220 BUSH (SUITE 548)

SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94104

BETWEEN SANSOME & MONTGOMERY

TWO LOCATIONS TO SERVE YOU

KENTFIELD

457-6928

1036 SIR FRANCIS DRAKE BLVD.

KENTFIELD, CA 94904

ACROSS FROM COLLEGE OF MARIN

continues



Still serving the Best Drinks in Town.


Essex Supper Club

- ▶ Fine Dining
- ▶ Bar Lounge
- ▶ Elegant Decor
- ▶ Billiards, Cigars & Cognacs
- ▶ Musical Entertainment & Dancing
- ▶ Available for Private Functions and Dinners

Open nightly Tuesday through Saturday
Cocktails served 5:30 pm 'til closing • Dinner served 6 pm 'til 10 pm
415/397-5969 • 847 Montgomery Street • San Francisco

Cornell House

ces THE CENTER FOR ENGLISH STUDIES

- Over 15 years experience
- Group and individual instruction
- TOEFL and CAMBRIDGE exam courses
- Frequent start dates
- Accredited by ACCET
- Study abroad programs
- Member International House  worldwide network

(415) 986-0898

I-20 Issued for International Students

Host International Students and Earn Money in our Homestay Program. We are looking for hosts.

450 Sansome (at Clay) S.F. 94111

L'Olivier

A FRENCH RESTAURANT

Service a la carte and prix fixe menu:

Three course lunch \$15.00

Four course dinner \$25.00

For

Lunch

Dinner

Private Parties

Special Menu For Valentine's Day

**465 DAVIS STREET, SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94111
TELEPHONE 415-981-7824**

Love American Style...*from page 11*

Something's Happening Here

Almost everyone has one or two devastatingly romantic moments tucked into the recesses of their mind, although getting people to talk about such moments is quite a different thing.

In the song of the same name, Cole Porter said "You do something to me, something that simply mystifies me." "George Harrison sang of then wife Patty Boyd in "Something in the way she moves me." Even the language we use when talking about love has an aura of mystery. It's that inexplicable *something* that tells you that you've just moved out of the everyday zone, and words like magical or enchanting lose some of the ridiculous patina that urban life can impart to them.

"It was instant something. I just didn't know what it was" said Toni Tenille of meeting Daryl, who became Captain to her Tenille. When talking to people about romantic moments, several things became apparent very quickly. It's not something people talk about easily. If you're looking for a straight answer, you'd do better to talk politics or religion.

Seven out of ten people interviewed said they were the wrong people to ask about romance. Others reeled off laundry lists of events, restaurants, movies attended, songs danced to, but for an outsider, penetration into the bubble of someone else's romance is a hard road.

"I was walking down Columbus

and I saw this girl in a cafe window. Something pulled me in there, and even though she was with a guy, I went in and sat down. I got into a conversation with them, and this led to another meeting. I fell in love with her, completely. I followed her to Italy to ask her to marry me." said Rob a salesman. He is still single.

So what's the magic ingredient? Scientists will write it off to increases and decreases in dopamine and serotonin, the chemicals that regulate feelings of excitement and well being in the brain. Darwinists will point to survival of the fittest and breeding patterns, astrologers will look to the heavens, psychiatrists will look to the past, and the rest of us, for the most part, just hope for the best.

"It's insanity," says Alex Bennett, TV and radio personality with Live 105 and Log On TV. "Romance is that initial insanity where you feel these wonderful pangs, but it doesn't really have its roots in anything practical. It lasts either a week and a half or forever, and I have my doubts about a week and a half."

Practical or impractical, whatever the mysterious bond that links one person to another may be, what is true is that romantic moments can and will happen anywhere, anytime. As Joan Crawford once said "Love is fire, but whether it's going to warm your hearth or burn your house down, you can never tell," and most of us just can't stop playing with matches. ▲

by Anne Marie Feld

Downtown Standouts...*from page 10*

Finally, I said, 'Bennett, don't worry. We can handle things.' He cares so much about this effort and wants to demonstrate that it can be successful." Hall looks with a mixture of pride and personal relief at the progress CCP has made in its first six months of existence. "We've demonstrated in action—not just in words—that the BID concept *can* work in one of the toughest areas of San Francisco. But we have so much further to go and there's so much more that can be done," he said. "We can accomplish only so much with our present budget of \$20,000 a month. We only operate until six o'clock each day. People might look around and say things haven't improved much at night. With a larger budget, we could be out there throughout the evening."

A larger budget and an extended reach in the service area can only come about, he stressed, if more and more neighborhood businesspeople get involved. According to Hall, the CCP is already taking steps towards that end. "Over the coming months, our Ambassadors will be going door-to-door to every single merchant, from the big stores to the small shops, distributing

information on how they can help this movement evolve," he said. "A lot of it is simply a matter of education. People don't know what their rights are or the courses of action that are open to them. So instead, they sit back and wonder who's going to solve their problems for them. I talk about this with people every day. I say, "Look, you have to participate in the process. You can't just wait for somebody to come along and fix things."

If anyone needs proof, they need look no further than Hall. He's never accepted a penny for the thousands of hours he has devoted to turning things around at the turnaround. Rather, he reflects on the transformation that has taken place within himself since the day he decided that talking about doing something was not enough. "I guess I brought a certain passion to the table, a level of creative enthusiasm and a sense of strategy," he said. "You could say this has been a highly demanding and consuming 'hobby' for me. It's been the most complicated game of chess I've ever played in my life. But I'll tell you this. I've learned more from it than anything I've ever tried." ▲

by Richard Keller