

Mute and alone, he was never short of kind words or friends

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Bernhardt Wichmann III in his room in Manhattan in 2009. “He had plenty of reasons to be unhappy,” a friend said. “But I never saw him unhappy.”

Photo by: Ángel Franco / The New York Times

Vocab Quiz: <http://www.learnclick.com/quiz/show/19417>

The man who lost his voice was a gentle man who didn’t ask terribly much of life. He lived in a miniature space in a single-room-occupancy residence on the corner of 74th Street and Third Avenue in Manhattan.

He was a New York story because he didn’t have a lot and yet he gave a lot. And in return he got what New York for all its busyness so often offers those who could use a good dose of it —

kindness. The city can be cold and aloof and you can live crunched amid its population and remain lonely and overlooked. You can also be someone unremarkable and be made to feel like Mr Big Shot.

The name of the man who lost his voice was Bernhardt Wichmann III. Sounds like an old-money name for sure, but any money ever attached to it was no longer visible.

His story revolves around a pair of doormen. In 1994, Jorge Grisales became a night doorman at the Mayfair, an apartment building at 207 East 74th Street. His shift began at midnight, when the city slows down but keeps breathing.

When you are a doorman, you notice things. You especially notice recurring people. Mr. Grisales became aware of a man who almost nightly ambled past the building. He had a glistening face with a trimmed beard and he sported a big smile. Six-foot-something. As he walked, he would bend down and scoop up litter, tidying up the neighborhood.

One sweaty summer evening, the smiling man waved at the doorman and paused. Mr. Grisales said, “How are you?” The man clutched scraps of paper. He wrote something down and handed it over. It said: “Hi, my name is Bernhardt but call me Ben. I can’t talk, but I can hear.”

Something instantly clicked between them. Two years later, Juan Arias joined the door staff, and Mr. Grisales introduced him to Ben. They, too, clicked. They talked. He wrote. On his notes, he always drew a smiley face.

Over time, the two doormen learned some blurred snippets about Ben Wichmann. That his parents came from Germany to Davenport, Iowa. That he was born in 1932. That he had served in the United States Army and was in the Korean War. That he came to New York and became an architectural draftsman. That he loved opera and classical music. That he was gay. That his parents and sister were dead and he had no family.

And that in 1983 he had polyps removed from his larynx, and that he had not been able to speak since. He wasn’t entirely sure why.

They discovered that since 1991, Ben had lived in that tiny third-floor room down the block that cost \$10 a day. He had few possessions. In a city where so many have so much, he had practically nothing. Yet it was always enough. His happiness bounced off him and settled on others. People up and down the block came to know him. He always patted people’s dogs and admired the flowers. His cheery presence made East 74th Street brighter than it would have been without him.

“He charmed people,” Mr Grisales said. “He always smiled. He never complained.”

Mr Arias said: “He had plenty of reasons to be unhappy. But I never saw him unhappy.” Ben would bring the doormen coffee and a Spanish newspaper. And they would fall into meandering exchanges — spoken words from the doormen, scribbling from Ben. They relished one another’s company.

Mr. Grisales was shaky with his English. That was why he worked the midnight shift. Ben tutored him. If Mr. Grisales mispronounced a word, Ben would write out how to say it, which syllables to emphasize, what words it rhymed with. Mr Grisales polished his English and graduated to an earlier shift.

The doormen gave Ben gifts — shirts or shoes, things he needed. So did others on the block. Joan Gralla, a reporter at Newsday who lives near the Mayfair, gave him sweaters, hats and a yellow rain jacket. For years, she got him a ticket to the Metropolitan Opera. She would tell him the ticket was from her dog, Clementine. Once, when the seat was exceptional, he wrote that Clementine must have some pull.

Every Thanksgiving, Mr Grisales had Ben come to his home in Queens for dinner. His wife and two children adored Ben. The family made him family.

Then the strangest thing happened. Last August, Ben was having hallucinations and went to the Veterans Affairs New York Harbor Healthcare System in Manhattan. An M.R.I. scan found nothing. When he got up from the M.R.I. machine, he mouthed the words “thank you” to the technician. Except that he heard his voice saying, “Thank you.” He could talk again!

One of the first things Ben did was ask to use the phone. He dialed Mr Grisales. “Hi, Jorge, it’s your friend Ben,” he said. The voice was deep and gravelly.

A puzzled Mr. Grisales said, “I have one friend with that name, and he can’t talk.”

“This is him,” Ben replied. “I can talk.”

Ben related what had happened. He said that he came out of the M.R.I., coughed and could speak. Not yet clued in, Mr. Arias went to visit him at the hospital. He entered his room and Ben said: “Hi, Juan. How are you?”

The miraculous transformation filled the two dumbfounded doormen with joy. Their Ben could speak.

Words spilled out of him. Again and again, he would relate the story of the M.R.I. machine and his recovered voice. The two doormen offered to get Ben a cellphone, make him the modern man, but he waved that off. It was enough for him just to talk. And talk. And talk.

Dr Babak Givi, a head and neck surgeon at the Veterans Affairs center, never examined Ben himself, though he was familiar with his records. He had no explanation for what had occurred, only that it was extraordinarily rare. “I don’t know everything,” Dr. Givi said. “Unbelievable things happen.”

His best guess — and it was nothing more than that — was that his voice box was not injured in that earlier surgery but that something psychosomatic happened that convinced his brain that he could no longer speak. And then something about the M.R.I. experience convinced him that he could again.

Miracles have expiration dates that can come mercilessly fast. For years, Ben had had prostate cancer. The cancer had been in remission, but it returned and was spreading.

Last fall, just a couple of months after finding his voice, he entered the hospital, then a nursing home in Queens. The doormen visited him there multiple times a week. A woman on the block bought him a radio so he could listen to music. He was always upbeat. The doormen went to cheer him up. He cheered them up.

He told the doormen he would recover and return to his little room on East 74th Street. And they assured him, why of course he would. On July 7, he died.

Since Ben was a veteran, a military service was arranged for him. At the service, an American flag was folded and presented to Mr Grisales, because this was one of the things that had been best in his life — knowing Ben.

Mr Grisales intends to hang the flag on the wall in his home, in a special place where he will always see it. Then, if anyone notices it and asks, well, they will need to sit down. He will have quite a story to tell.