

‘A long short life’: Family, friends believe S.F. man was ‘indirect victim’ of pandemic

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Ever since his death in December, the people who knew Jorge Sánchez have taken comfort in knowing that he lived a full life — that it would take most people 150 years to experience all the love and joy he fit into 50. One friend called it “a long short life.”

“He was a bon vivant,” said Leslie McLean, a friend. “He was somebody who would accept every social invitation and then actually go to every social invitation and actually be able to be really present.”

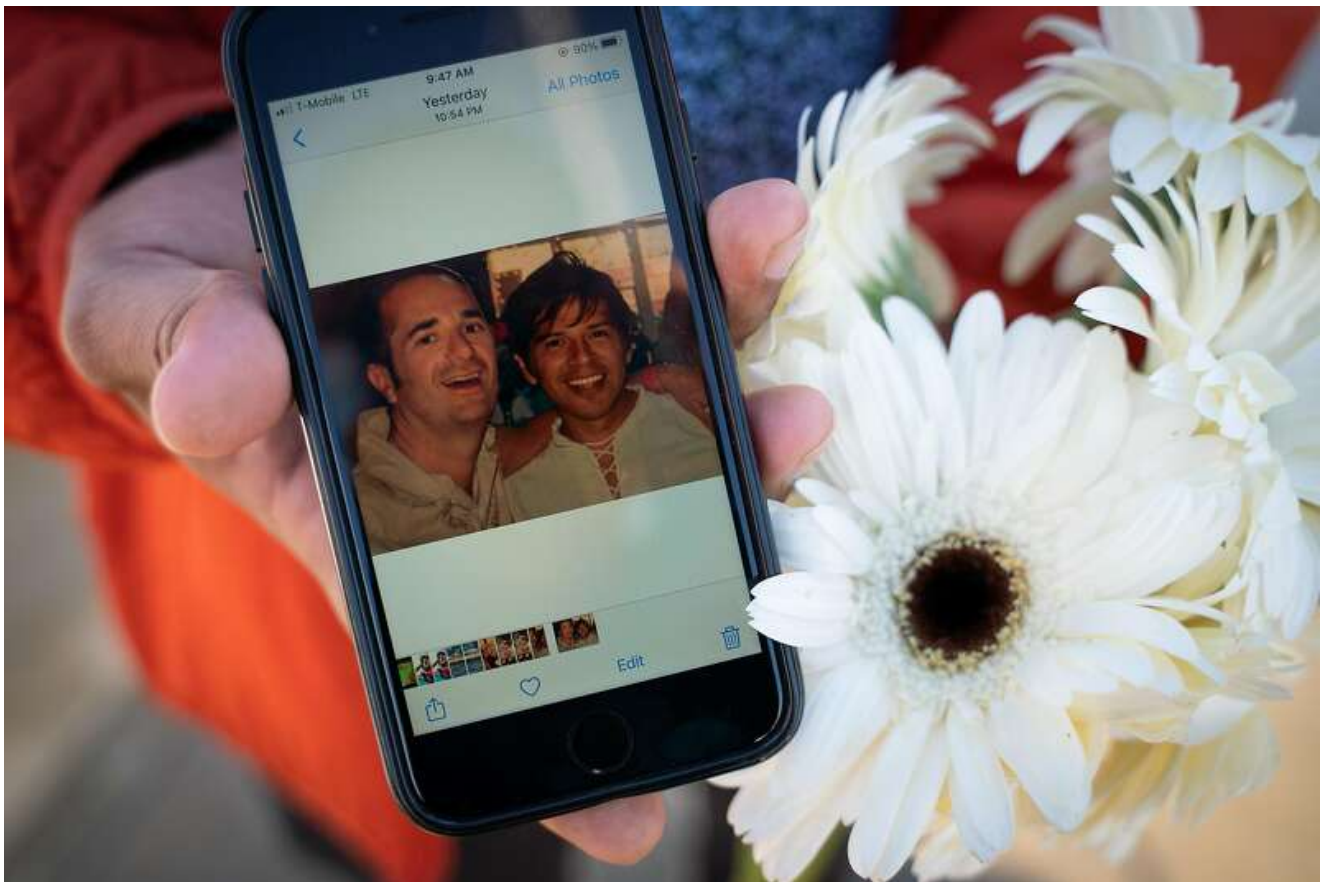
Shortly after he died, and with less than a day’s notice, 134 people showed up on a Zoom to remember Sánchez. María Leticia Gómez, another friend who considered Sánchez family, looked at all of the faces on the screen. She knew Sánchez had other friends, but this was more than that; nobody seemed to be a casual acquaintance. “Just the level of connectedness between Jorge and each and every one of those individuals was amazing,”

she said. “We can have only so many close friends, but he seemed to be close friends with and know and care about so many people, about them, about their children, about their parents.”

These relationships and his busy days sustained Sánchez, said José “Miguel” Vázquez, his partner of 14 years. And losing much of that to the coronavirus pandemic is what killed him, Vázquez said. His sisters and close friends agree.

“In previous years in life, he had depressions, deep depressions,” Vázquez said. But he could always lift himself out of the dark with dinner parties and art openings and trips to the Russian River. As months of social distancing were extended with no real end in sight, that sort of healing became less and less possible.

The man who loved water, who worked with gay and bisexual Latinos at the nonprofit Aguilas, who could get anybody to open up about the deepest of subjects was, friends say, “an indirect victim” of the pandemic.



Miguel Vazquez, 42, (right) shows an early photo of himself and his late partner, Jorge Sanchez, 50, during a gathering at the marina in Berkeley, Calif., on Saturday, Jan. 23, 2021. Sanchez, who died last month, was involved in HIV/AIDS activism and helped foster acceptance between immigrant families and their queer children.

Sarahbeth Maney / Special to The Chronicle

On the morning of Dec. 11, Vázquez became worried when his calls to Sánchez weren't going through. The two men lived apart, but near each other in San Francisco — they had tried sharing a home early on, but Vázquez can be “messy” and Sánchez was a meticulous person.

During his lunchtime, Vázquez went to Sánchez's apartment in the Mission District. He knocked, but there was no response. He tried his keys, but the door was locked from the inside. “I started feeling this kind of panic,” he said.

Eventually he climbed in through the bathroom window. He found Sánchez cold in his bed, the covers pulled up around him. His necklace and rings were on the bedside table next to him — proof, Vázquez believes, that “he got ready to go to sleep thinking he would wake up the next day.” He was 50 years old and had no known health problems.

Sánchez's friends and family don't know exactly what happened. The official cause of death is pending and may be for months to come. But here is what Vázquez and others imagine, after talking to his primary care physician: Maybe Sánchez had mixed himself a cocktail or poured a glass of wine the evening before, as a way to unwind. “When you're alone,” Vázquez said, “depression and anxiety kicks harder because your brain is spinning and spinning and spinning.” When it got time for bed, though, maybe his mind wasn't any quieter, so he took a pill to help — he'd taken sleeping aids for years — and then another, until finally he drifted off for the last time.



Jorge Sanchez, left, and his partner Jose "Miguel" Vazquez, celebrate Sanchez's 42nd birthday in October 2012 with a dinner party at the home of Maria Leticia Gomez and Juan Carlos Guerrero.
Courtesy María Leticia Gómez 2012

For the past year, there has been story after story about the mental health toll of the pandemic and the social isolation it has forced upon so many. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have tried to track the fallout. According to one study, released last summer, adults in the United States were three times more likely to experience symptoms of anxiety disorder in July than they were in the second quarter of 2019. They were four times more likely to experience symptoms of depression. One in 10 adults has reported starting or increasing substance use because of COVID-19. Because of methodological differences in surveys, this isn't an exact year-over-year comparison, but the evidence points to what many know firsthand to be true: The pandemic has taken a toll on mental health.

"This is really difficult for people, and the social isolation is one of the things that, as a mental health professional, we're always encouraging people to socialize more," said Jonathan Horowitz, a clinical psychologist and director of the San Francisco Stress and Anxiety Center. "The pandemic has put us in a difficult spot. We can't focus on that one aspect of life that's really, really important."

Humans are social animals, Horowitz said, and isolation is “always considered to be a risk factor for mental illness and other disorders.” Even casual daily interactions with co-workers or strangers waiting in line for coffee can be “key drivers of happiness.”

The loss of all this, of travel and shared meals and evenings out with friends, can be particularly hard for people like Sánchez.

Sánchez was born on the first day of October 1970 in Bogota, Colombia, a city of 7 million high in the Andes Mountains. As he moved from Colombia to London, Los Angeles, New York City and finally the Bay Area, where he finished his anthropology degree at UC Berkeley, he seemed to carry Bogota and its rich history and culture with him. It was like “he had stepped out of a (Gabriel) García Márquez novel,” his friend McLean said. “There was something timeless about him, in the kind of wonderful way of being old-fashioned.”

His apartment on Guerrero Street felt, in some ways, like a reproduction of a 1960s or '70s apartment in Bogota, said his longtime friend Ignacio Valero, like he had “transported a little bit of his life from Bogota back to San Francisco.” It was small and warm and full of books on every subject. He had a dark green velvet couch — “very plush” — where friends would gather when he hosted salons, or *tertulias*, before an art opening or after a night at the opera. He’d light candles, turn on soft music, pass around chocolates and pour glasses of wine. “He always had excellent wines,” Valero said. The nights were open-ended, no rushing, precisely as long as they needed to be. “Jorge was a person who added,” he said. “He always added something. A person who adds and doesn’t take away.”

His father had wanted him to be an architect, Vázquez said, but Sánchez was too interested in people to spend his life designing buildings. “He wanted to be an anthropologist because he was very interested in working and knowing how people think and grow. He was always very curious about the human community.”

It didn’t matter a person’s age or background: Sánchez found a way of connecting with people.

He made everybody feel seen, and it was sincere, Gómez said. “He could get into conversations with rocks.”



(Left to right) Tomas Olmos, 34, Josh Martinez, 31, and Sandra Hernandez, 38, cheers to honor the life of their late friend, Jorge Sanchez, 50, during a gathering at the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, Calif., on Saturday, Jan. 23, 2021. "He loved to go to the water," said Martinez. "Jorge was always the first one to jump in."

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Sánchez spent much of his life working at various organizations with Latino LGBTQ youth and their families. Sánchez was close with his mother and father, Vázquez said, but it had taken a while for them to accept their son was gay. Sánchez understood that acceptance was essential, that without it, youth were more likely to experience any number of negative health outcomes. He also worked in HIV/AIDS prevention, both here and in Cartagena, Colombia.

Vázquez and Sánchez met in 2006. It was a week before Thanksgiving, and Sánchez was giving a presentation at Aguilas, a community and support center for gay and bisexual Latinos. The two sat together, surprised they hadn't crossed paths earlier. When they bumped into each other at a friend's impromptu housewarming, Sánchez and Vázquez acknowledged what they'd felt that first night.

Sánchez was like air, Valero said, and Vázquez is a "very present, very grounded person." They were "a wonderful combination. We always consciously or subconsciously reach for our complement."

In October, they talked about getting married. Vázquez called a friend at City Hall to figure out exactly what they'd need, but in the end they decided to wait. They didn't want to do the ceremony over Zoom. "We decided we should get married as soon as they opened City Hall," he said. "Obviously, that never happened. That makes me very sad."



Friends and family members honor the life of Jorge Sanchez, 50, by taking a boat beneath the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, Calif., on Saturday, Jan. 23, 2021. Sanchez, who died last month, was involved in HIV/AIDS activism and helped foster acceptance between immigrant families and their queer children.

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Last weekend, Vázquez organized a very different kind of celebration.

Everybody who talks about Jorge mentions how much he loved the water. He would jump into any pool, lake or ocean. He'd splash around in puddles and spend days swimming in the Russian River. "The water was his element," Vázquez said. "That's the reason why I wanted to give him a last ride around the bay."

So last weekend, Vázquez boarded a sailboat with Sánchez's two sisters, a couple of friends and his partner's ashes. He couldn't release the ashes into the bay, but he had collected some sand from their special spot on Baker Beach and scattered that instead, watching it disappear into the blue.

The sky was bright between days of gray and rain, and as the sailboat cut back and forth underneath the Golden Gate Bridge, dozens of friends looked down from the span. They hollered and blew kisses and cried and hugged. They shared some mezcal and poured a little over the side of the bridge. Some threw flowers. Baby's breath. Sunflowers. White roses.

From the boat, it looked like it was raining flowers.

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