A mayor, and the people he touched

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Globe Staff Photos

In Roslindale, on the South Boston Waterfront, in Mattapan, across Boston, Menino made the city his own.

When he revealed in a Faneuil Hall address that he would not run again, Thomas M. Menino offered a travelogue of his two decades as mayor, of promises made and promises kept.

It was a sentimental journey, to corners of the city that had changed profoundly since Menino became mayor in 1993. In the twilight of his tenure — and, it would turn out, the twilight of his life — Menino took the audience on that spring day last year to Roslindale and West Roxbury, Bowdoin-Geneva and Mattapan.

“It is a buzzing, amazing, history-making place,” he said of his city.

Of course, it is not a perfect city. Progress was uneven in some neighborhoods and schools during the Menino years, and crime, though not as bad as it once was, remained a scourge in some communities.

On the occasion of Menino’s death — he will lay in repose Sunday in the same place where he announced he would not seek another term — Globe reporters visited the neighborhoods and spoke with some of the people the man from Hyde Park mentioned in his March 2013 valedictory.

In Grove Hall, there’s the convenience store owner who no longer packs pistols on each hip. On the South Boston Waterfront, a priest with a changed congregation. In Roslindale, a farmers market stalwart who says of the former mayor: “You drive over the Tobin Bridge. The sun’s coming up. The city’s all his.”

Wendy Maeda/Globe Staff

Emily Newburger and Amy Gitlin (right) shopped at the Farmer's Market in Roslindale Village on Saturday.

“All you do is start in Roslindale and rebuild its Main Street with neighbors.”

Peter MacArthur boasts that his are the best tomatoes in all of Massachusetts, but his farm never would have made it in the first place if it weren’t for Thomas M. Menino and Roslindale Village.

MacArthur was one of the first participants in the farmers market in 1984, back when Roslindale Village was still Roslindale Square, a scruffy commercial corner where business owners yanked metal grates over their storefronts when they locked up.

Of this, MacArthur is certain: His farm in Holliston would have floundered if not for the farmers market. In the beginning, it was a tiny operation — just him and his kids, driving a ramshackle station wagon. But when Menino turned the center of Roslindale into one of the first urban Main Street programs in the nation — improving storefronts, bringing in businesses, presiding over so many ribbon-cuttings he sometimes crammed two or three into a single day — the neighborhood’s farmers market grew and grew, and became the backbone of MacArthur’s operation.

“I was gonna write him a letter. I wanted to thank him,” says MacArthur, who is 59 and burly, with a salt-and-pepper mustache and dirt under his fingernails. He will still write the letter, he says, standing under a tent at his farm stand, but he will address it to Menino’s family. “They don’t know how good he made my life.”

MacArthur was in his field picking broccoli on the morning the mayor died, and Menino was already on his mind. In the early days of the market, Menino once or twice took every last stalk of broccoli, because it was his daughter's favorite. Then, MacArthur's daughter texted him that Menino had passed away.

"It's like part of me is gone," MacArthur says.

MacArthur has missed exactly one Roslindale farmers market in 30 years. He rises before dawn to ready the cases of Granny Smith and gala apples, ears of corn, squash, turnips, parsnips, bunches of swiss chard and, of course, tomatoes, to haul to Roslindale. The city always makes him think of Menino.

"You drive over the Tobin Bridge. The sun's coming up. The city's all his."

EVAN ALLEN

Yoon S. Byun/Globe Staff/File 2013

A bench in Dorchester dedicated to Menino.

"You walk with the proud residents of Bowdoin-Geneva every Christmas Eve as they survey their progress, and you keep walking until the job is done."

Nicole Lewis remembers the first time that she saw the mayor in Bowdoin-Geneva, the neighborhood where she has owned a dry cleaner and laundromat with her husband for 27 years.

It wasn't to pass out toys during his Christmas Eve walk along Bowdoin Street, but in response to a shooting. The street had been sprayed with bullets, and the facade of her store was pocked by the violence.

"We had, like, 13 shots. It was scary," she says from behind the counter of her business. Lewis still remembers the date of the shooting: April 15, 1995.

Menino, who would become the city's longest-serving mayor, had been in office just under two years. "He came to the meeting and showed his concern," she recalls.

That certainly was not the last time Menino visited this embattled Dorchester neighborhood, which still struggles with poverty and violence but is fighting for resurrection, a neighborhood that some said had rarely seen a politician before.

At Christmas, Menino walked the streets, passing out toys to children, talking with residents. "Basically, he played Santa for the kids," says Shawn Nelson, owner of Fwresh Salon and Spa, as he sharpens the edges of a customer's hairline and beard with clippers.

Menino made sure his office supported small businesses, fixed parks, created youth programs, and targeted problem landlords. In the summer, police officers play pickup basketball in Ronan Park.

He provided the seed money to help the Teen Center at St. Peter's become a refuge for the community's Cape Verdean youths, pushing them to finish high school and go to college.

"I hope we can have another mayor for the people like Mayor Menino," Nelson says.

On Christmas Eve last year, Adilson Rodrigues waited in his Bowdoin Street electronics store for the mayor.

On the wall is a picture of a previous visit, a smiling Menino with Rodrigues wearing a Santa hat and scarf.

But there would be no such moment last December. Menino's trip stopped short of the store.

"He was tired," Rodrigues explains, a newscast in the background airing a report about the mayor's death.

AKILAH JOHNSON

Wendy Maeda/Globe Staff

Grove Hall's Mecca Mall.

“You promise the people of Grove Hall a supermarket and shopping mall and you deliver.”

Patrons carrying Styrofoam boxes of spicy jerk chicken from a brightly lit Jamaican restaurant. A young man proudly washing the window of his shop showcasing trendy urban streetwear.

Standing behind the counter of Grove Hall Convenience Market, Roy Arroyo recalls how different the neighborhood was 38 years ago, when he opened his grocery store selling plantains and pastelitos on Blue Hill Avenue in Dorchester.

“What was it like?” he says, smiling. “I had to carry two guns, one over here and one over here,” he says, motioning to where he kept a pair of .38s holstered on his hips.

Along the streets of Grove Hall, busy with barber shops and Caribbean markets**,** it is Menino who gets much of the credit for the transformation.

“He did say he was going to change Grove Hall — and he did,” says Arroyo, who is 71, the same age Menino was. “Right now, you wouldn’t be around here if he hadn’t succeeded. You’d be scared.”

The biggest change, Arroyo says, was the opening in 2000 of the Mecca Mall, with a Dunkin’ Donuts, a CVS, and a Stop & Shop, the first supermarket in Grove Hall in 20 years. Menino called it his “crown jewel” — a symbol of his commitment to spread development beyond downtown.

But there were smaller improvements, too. Planters in the median strip. Trash barrels on the sidewalks. Renovated storefronts, including removing the metal grates for Arroyo’s market.

“It was ugly,” Arroyo recalls. “He fixed it up, like he did to almost every store on Blue Hill Ave.”

Race riots racked Grove Hall in the 1960s. Gangs flourished in the 1970s. Drugs took over in the 1980s.

Arroyo, originally from Puerto Rico, kept his merchandise behind thick plexiglass, and greeted customers through a tiny window. “You never felt safe,” he says. “Now, you call the police, and they’ll be here in minutes.

“Before, you called the police, they’d go the other way. They were scared.”

For the last 15 years, Arroyo has worked from behind an open counter, his cat, Kitty, curled up on a shelf behind him, and his Shih Tzu-poodle mixes, Toby and Pancho, scurrying at his feet.

A few years ago, he says, Menino stopped in. The mayor settled into one of the plastic booths for some roast pork, and they chatted about the New England Patriots.

Another time, Arroyo says, he looked out the back door of the shop, onto Cheney Street, and saw the mayor walking, alone. It was early morning, and Menino was on his way to a party for children in a Grove Hall park.

“I saw him walking down, and I said, ‘It can’t be,’ ” he recalls.

“But when I looked, it was Menino walking down and going to a kid’s party. That was Menino.”

MICHAEL LEVENSON

Wendy Maeda/Globe Staff

Millenium Park in West Roxbury.

“You say in West Roxbury that a landfill will become a park and then you return for soccer games.”

Back when Millennium Park was still a dump, Jack’s cousin used to come here to shoot rats, and Jack had no use for the place at all.

“I don’t like living next to dumps,” says the 84-year-old retired businessman from West Roxbury. Jack lives alone and likes it that way — no cellphone, no home phone, nobody to bother him. No last name for a reporter, so nobody can look him up.

But these days, Jack loves people-watching at Millennium Park, which under Menino turned from a landfill into 100 acres of trails, ball fields, and picnic areas.

Jack walks loops in the park every day, sometimes for hours, sometimes twice a day. If he was any happier, he says, he'd need a twin to help him enjoy it.

"Look at the different colors. Look at the Charles River. It's beautiful. It's tranquil. It's a getaway," he says, pausing in his final circuit around the park's highest point, arm outstretched at the 360-degree view dominated by the yellows, ochers, and burnt siennas of autumn leaves. "I love to watch the children and the dogs. For me, it's a place of joy."

He strolls and thinks. Of what, he will not tell.

"My thoughts are my own," he says.

A short distance away, beyond the empty playground, a flag flapped at half-staff above a stone monument bearing Menino's name, marking the park's November 2000 dedication.

"He can be proud of it," Jack says. "I bet if he walked around here, he'd be happy as a pig in the you-know-what."

EVAN ALLEN

"You shovel dirt in Dudley Square to move what seemed like mountains."

When Chris Jones walks from Dudley Square toward Uphams Corner, a neighborhood once blighted by more than 1,000 vacant lots and myriad boarded-up storefronts, he sees Menino's fingerprints everywhere.

On more than 700 affordable homes. On three new schools, a sparkling new police station, a thriving community center with art classes and a water play area, several parks, a 1.5-acre urban farm, a 10,000-square-foot greenhouse, a new, locally owned supermarket still being built.

"Every bit of this, the mayor championed either directly or through his policies," says Jones, executive director of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative.

The mayor, he says, helped clear the way for the first affordable home his group built, and for the transformation of the Ferdinand Building from an abandoned furniture store into an elegant headquarters for Boston's public schools.

He compared the Ferdinand — a fusion of a modern and historic building slated to open next year — to an iceberg.

"It represents so much more that's below the surface — a deeper, broader relationship he had with the people of our neighborhood," Jones says.

Menino was constantly visiting local businesses, shaking hands, attending ribbon cuttings.

Like in 2005, when he welcomed Haley House, a hip cafe that has sought to bring people together from across the city.

In the years afterward, he would stop in every few weeks for the chicken quesadilla, blueberry pie, or just to chat up the recently released ex-cons working behind the counter. He and Governor Deval Patrick met for lunch there on Election Day in 2010.

“The mayor never stopped emphasizing that the focus needed to be on Dudley,” says Bing Broderick, executive director of Haley House**.**

Last week, the cafe’s staff was still struggling to comprehend that a man so full of life and energy would no longer be stopping in.

“It’s hard to fathom,” says Michael Cooley, a line cook. “It already feels like something’s missing.”

DAVID ABEL

John Tlumacki/Globe Staff

John Whalen painted lines on part of the Harborwalk next to the ICA.

“To build Boston’s waterfront with a new generation, you collaborate because that’s what truly meeting people is.”

When the first prayers echoed through the Chapel of Our Lady of Good Voyage in 1952, parishioners who stepped outside after Mass looked out on Fan Pier and the harbor beyond, and Tom Menino was a 10-year-old boy.

“Across the street was flat land, and you would see the USS Constitution go by,” says the Rev. Joe White, pastor of St. Vincent de Paul Parish in South Boston and administrator of the chapel.

The fish pier and the chapel remain, but the transformation of Boston’s waterfront during Menino’s two decades in office has touched nearly everything else. Across the street from Our Lady of Good Voyage, where people still stop on weekdays to light candles and write prayer requests, a tower of steel and glass and stone rises. Cranes swing girders and welders’ sparks shower down from above. In a small, graceful park overlooking the water, an afternoon touch football game gives way to an early evening wedding.

“I’m sure when Mayor Menino was a city councilor and he had luncheon engagements at Anthony’s Pier 4, he could not have envisioned what he and now Mayor Walsh have undertaken,” White, 54, says.

That has changed both the present and the future for the humble chapel where Mass once was populated almost entirely by longshoremen and others making their living off the ocean. Today, White says, Sunday services bring a diverse and changing crowd — longtime worshippers, but also hotel and service industry workers, along with some of the young professionals drawn by the companies that have put down roots in what is now the Innovation District.

A landscape once defined mainly by parking lots is now home to Vertex Pharmaceuticals, Enernoc, and Zipcar. A tower near Pier 4 boasts “Boston’s Newest Luxury Apartments.” Elegant restaurants and high-end hotels swim like pilot fish alongside the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center.

Developers and neighbors have been hugely supportive of each other and of the chapel’s continued presence, White says — testament to Menino’s insistent outreach and consensus building.

The chapel, too, will make way for the raging development all around: The start of construction on the chapel’s new home at the foot of the Moakley Bridge will be marked with a groundbreaking this month.

“Rest his soul,” White says, “Mayor Menino would have attended.”

NESTOR RAMOS

Barry Chin/Globe Staff

Marie Darline Phane assisted her children Sevenson, 2, and Stevenda, 4, with craft projects at the Mattapan Library.

"You read to children at dazzling new libraries in Mattapan and Brighton."

The old Mattapan branch library, a brick building on Hazelton Street, had a generic handsomeness to it — somewhere between small-college admissions hall and suburban bank — but had long outlived its usefulness, cramped and dimly illuminated.

The new library around the corner is everything the old one was not, a civic beacon of glass, stone, and wood amid the nail salons and Caribbean restaurants of Blue Hill Avenue. At 21,000 square feet, it is three times the size of the old library, and its airy reading hall feeds a vast meeting room, a courtyard with trees and bistro tables, and inviting enclaves for children and young adults, all of which the old library lacked.

"It's just fabulous, just awesome," says Arlene Cruthird, a library assistant, recalling the decade-plus effort from task force to city and state funding to completion, Menino leading the way. "It was worth the wait."

Like others who love the library, she finds it hard to believe it will be six years in March since it opened. A $16.7 million building designed by William Rawn Associates, the same firm behind Tanglewood's Seiji Ozawa Hall, it remains fresh, a magnet for residents and a monument to Menino's belief that even neighborhoods without traditional political clout deserve great buildings, and to his efforts to level, even if only slightly, the stubborn inequities among sections of the city.

One recent day, many of the reading-room computers and most of the tables are in use. In a corner, beneath panorama windows and past shelves of books in Spanish and French Creole, a man in a winter hat studies an English-grammar guide.

In the children's craft room, librarian Meghan Withers-Tong — dressed for Halloween as Mary Poppins — leads a mask- and bookmark-making session, tables strewn with crayons and felt.

Armyi Hardy, a third-grader with thick glasses, carefully applies pieces to a pattern for a werewolf book mark. The boy comes every afternoon, doing homework and joining activities.

At the next table, Marie Darline Phane colors between the lines of a butterfly mask with her 4-year-old daughter, Stevendra, while 2-year-old son Stevenson scrawls across a monster face.

"Oh, look at that monster. It's going to be so scary!" the librarian tells the boy, helping him tie the string and put it on.

"Say thank you," says Phane, a Haitian immigrant who comes daily with her children, checking out books and Barney CDs.

Masks on, Stevenson and Stevendra stick their arms out like zombies, toddling back into the bright light of the children's room and roaring with glee. Too young to have heard of Menino, they already enjoy one of his signature spaces.

ERIC MOSKOWITZ

TOM HERDE/globe staff

Hispanic markets along Meridian Street in East Boston.

“You open your arms to all New Bostonians and then stand with them as they become citizens.”

The day Menino died, Alvaro Garcia folded clothes in his East Boston laundromat, the television flashing scenes of the mayor’s life. Originally from Colombia, Garcia had never met the mayor. But like many in the immigrant enclave, he feels as if he had.

“They loved him so much,” Garcia says.

Boston has long been an immigrant city, and in Eastie, about half the residents are immigrants, much higher than the city average of 27 percent. Most are Spanish speakers from nations such as Colombia or El Salvador. Most could not have voted for Menino, because they aren’t US citizens.

Yet, in Menino, many immigrants saw an ally and a defender, in Eastie, Chinatown, and his own Hyde Park. For him, foreigners were family, like his Italian grandparents who lived upstairs when he was a boy. He saw their struggles with poverty, discrimination, and language barriers.

Even the mayor’s own linguistic garbles endeared him to immigrants, who understand the frustrations of communicating better than most.

“Sometimes, you don’t have to speak another language for people to love you,” says Garcia, a 54-year-old immigrant from Medellin, Colombia, who has one child in college and another in high school. “People could perceive it in his actions, his works.”

In 1998, Menino created the Office of New Bostonians, one of the first city departments of its kind nationwide, to help immigrants find English classes, free legal advice, help buying a house or other services. He promoted immigrant businesses and threw his weight behind a national effort to allow immigrants in the United States illegally to apply for citizenship.

Menino’s administration faced criticism in 2011 for allowing Boston to join the federal Secure Communities program to detect criminals here illegally, after the Globe revealed that the program also ensnared people who weren’t criminals at traffic stops. Menino fired off a letter to federal officials threatening to quit the program if they did not fix it.

In Eastie, among his last acts in office was announcing plans for a massive overhaul of a public park, including a soccer field popular with immigrants. He also unveiled a new branch of the public library. The day he died, children read books after school, whispering in English and Spanish.

MARIA SACCHETTI

“You rally with gay friends and neighbors.”

Daunasia Yancey was 13. She put on her vision of the best prom outfit: a brand-new pair of black sneakers, blue jeans, and a “Rainbow City” T-shirt. Walking into Boston City Hall on that May evening eight years ago, she couldn’t believe the flashing lights, the DJ, the crowd of more than 1,000 teens.

“I was blown away,” says Yancey, now 22. “This is a GBLT event, and it’s huge. And it’s in one of the major buildings in the city.”

For her, Menino’s decision to open the doors of City Hall to this annual prom, sponsored by the group now known as the Boston Alliance of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth, was profound, a sign the city’s most powerful political figure knew that hundreds of teenagers like her needed an alternative to the traditional tuxedo-and-gown parties.

It was in the mid-1990s, within a few years of his debut as mayor, when Menino allowed City Hall to be the destination for the party. The prom, which began in 1981 in the basement of a church, was soon drawing crowds in the hundreds. It now routinely attracts some 1,500 young people each year.

“By offering City Hall as a venue for the BAGLY prom, it set a standard of celebration for LBGT youth,” says Yancey, a relative of City Councilor Charles C. Yancey.

Yancey, who lives in the South End, now works part time for BAGLY, and helps with the annual May prom that she, as of this year, is too old to attend.

When a friend told her about Menino’s death, Yancey was deeply saddened. Menino stood for so much she cared about. He refused to march in South Boston’s traditional St. Patrick’s Day parade when it banned groups advocating lesbian and gay rights, and he welcomed the first same-sex couple to marry in Boston City Hall.

Knowing Menino had died, she searched her Facebook page, recalling she has photos of him. She posted one on the BAGLY website that shows Menino standing next to her during one of his visits to their offices.

And there was another, taken at one of her last BAGLY proms. Yancey wore a long black sleeveless gown, and her girlfriend, Alyssa Green, wore a tuxedo. In the photo, the couple hold each other, and in the background, hanging on a wall of City Hall, is a portrait of the mayor.

PATRICIA WEN