

DONIE VANITZIAN, 1950 – 2017

Champion of homeowners' rights

BY ANDREW KHOURI

For more than 16 years in her Sunday Los Angeles Times column, Donie Vanitzian helped frazzled homeowners navigate the minefield that can be living within a homeowners association.

The columns often focused on alleged wrongdoing by board members, management companies and other people in positions of power.

A pugnacious advocate for homeowners, she would contact legislators on HOA-related bills and even respond to readers seeking guidance, regardless of whether she wrote about their experiences in print, one colleague said.

"She had quite the following," said her sister Alysia Vanitzian. "She would get tons of email and mail from people living in HOAs wanting to send her gifts and money, because she was so helpful."

Vanitzian, 67, died Dec. 28 at her house in Del Rey, the victim of an alleged homicide.

The L.A. County district attorney's office has charged Vanitzian's husband of 35 years, Thomas Foster, with one count of murder.

Los Angeles Police Lt. John Radtke said Foster, 75, left a note detailing his plans to kill Vanitzian and then commit suicide. Foster was found at the home nearly unconscious, authorities said. Radtke said some evidence has emerged that Foster had a degree of mental illness.

He pleaded not guilty Wednesday in Los Angeles County Superior Court.

"It's a tragic situation," said Michael Krieger, a friend and occasional co-author of the Times column.

Born Donna Vee Vanitzian on Jan. 1, 1950, in Burbank, Vanitzian grew up in the San Fernando Valley and graduated from Granada Hills High School and Cal State Northridge.

After college, she worked and traveled throughout Europe, where she met Foster, who owned several nightclubs in northern England, according to family.

She eventually moved back to the United States and attended law school.

Alysia Vanitzian de-



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L.A. Times contributing columnist Donie Vanitzian, shown in 1990, was an advocate for homeowners.

scribed her eldest sister as a vivacious, hardworking "homebody" who tended to a vegetable garden, worked on her columns and, at the time of her death, was caring for their 97-year-old mother.

Krieger said Vanitzian took an obsessive joy in tending her garden, even driving more than 20 miles from Del Rey to Eagle Rock for just the right soil.

"She was very proud in the quality of things she was making," he said.

When not gardening, Vanitzian dedicated herself to helping HOA residents, something she attributed partly to her experiences while living within one.

In her first Times' column in 2001, the mediator and arbitrator gave advice to someone who couldn't get the homeowners association to explain why a delinquent assessment was levied. A year later, she and attorney Stephen Glassman published "Villa Appalling! Destroying the Myth of Affordable Community Living."

It was marketed as a "textbook for understanding common interest developments, homeowner asso-

ciations and planned communities."

"Solving people's problems — she really thrived on that," her sister said.

Indeed, when Vanitzian's column didn't appear in print on Sundays, Business Editor Kimi Yoshino said she would immediately hear from readers.

"Donie had a very loyal following," Yoshino said. "For nearly 17 years, she provided a public service to residents of homeowners associations and was a fierce champion of their rights. Her column will be missed."

Attorney Zachary Levine, who co-wrote many of Vanitzian's Times columns since 2013, said there aren't many people looking out for homeowners within HOAs, because the "money is in helping associations."

With Vanitzian gone, he said, homeowners are "really going to suffer a loss."

Vanitzian is survived by her younger sisters Alysia and Carissa, and her mother Vardi Vanitzian.

andrew.khouri@latimes.com
Staff writer Richard Winton contributed to this report.