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Irish American Daniel Cassidy dead at 65

Daniel Cassidy, an award-winning author, filmmaker and former college professor, died Saturday of pancreatic cancer at his home in San Francisco. He was 65.

Mr. Cassidy, a leader of the Bay Area's Irish American community, won the 2007 American Book Award for nonfiction for his pioneering treatise, "How the Irish Invented Slang: The Secret Language of the Crossroads."

With his passion for language, Mr. Cassidy traced the influence of Irish phrases on the development of American slang in the 1800s, discovering Irish roots in a slew of words that are common today in daily speech - like jazz, scam, brag, rookie, snazzy, fluke, knack, slugger, poker and sucker. Critics hailed his book as an assault on conventional, academic wisdom and Webster's dictionary, which had not ascribed Irish influence on some of the words.

His insightful writing also appeared in the New York Times, The Chronicle, the New York Observer and the Atlantic Monthly magazine. He wrote a column for the Irish Echo newspaper, called "Slanguage."

In March 2007, Irish America magazine in New York designated Mr. Cassidy as among the year's most influential Irish Americans for his contributions to education. "It was a privilege to know him; a great grace to have had his friendship," author Peter Quinn said in an e-mail. "His legacy to the Irish-American community is inestimable. We are so much poorer for his passing."

Before becoming ill, Mr. Cassidy was working on a research project that documented scores of intermarriages of Irish immigrants and African Americans in certain neighborhoods of Manhattan.

In 1995, Mr. Cassidy founded and co-directed the Irish Studies program at New College of California (which closed its doors earlier this year due to financial problems). It was one of the first such programs in the country. He also was director of the college's Media and Film Studies program, teaching courses in storytelling, the American newspaper and broadcast history. And he was a co-founder of San Francisco's annual Crossroads Irish-American Festival.

"He brought his qualities as a very good human being into the community on a political and humanitarian level," said San Francisco writer Eddie Stack. "My sense of Danny was that he had a heart of gold. He was always on the side of the underdog, the downtrodden and disenfranchised. Culturally, I think he has made a massive impact with his book. I think in time it will be seen probably as one of the greatest keys to unlock the mysteries of the Diaspora."

Daniel Cassidy was born in Brooklyn, the son of a Navy chief petty officer. He attended the New York Military Academy on a full scholarship due to his musical talents. He studied English literature and creative writing at Cornell University in the 1960s. After graduation, he joined the New York Times as a news assistant in the newspaper's United Nations bureau. He left the paper to pursue screenwriting, studying briefly at the

New School for Social Research in New York City.

From the late 1960s through about 1980, Mr. Cassidy was a professional musician. He started out as a reed player and then cut an album as a singer and composer. He played juke joints, Carnegie Hall, the Los Angeles Civic Auditorium and the Tonight Show - performing with comedian George Carlin, Kenny Rankin, Lilly Tomlin, and Jorge Calderon.

He sold film scripts and treatments, worked for television producer David Susskind, and pursued film development projects for actor Danny Glover and director Francis Ford Coppola.

His documentary "Civil Rights and Civil Wrongs" about the troubled politics of Northern Ireland was nominated in 1996 for an Emmy Award. His film, "Uncensored Voices," was broadcast on Public Broadcasting Service stations and also in Europe, Japan and Canada.

As a civil rights activist, a critic of the Vietnam War, and union organizer, Mr. Cassidy strove to make a difference. Reacting to the Bloody Sunday shootings in Northern Ireland in 1972, he became an ardent Irish nationalist.

Mr. Cassidy is survived by his wife, Clare McIntyre, whom he married in 1983. A memorial service for Mr. Cassidy is scheduled for 1 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 21, at St. Paul's Catholic Church at 221 Valley St. (near corner of 29th and Church streets) in San Francisco.

The family asks that contributions be sent to Crossroads Home Care & Hospice, 1109 Vicente St., Suite 104, San Francisco, CA 94116.