

Robert Avalon, 47, pianist, mayor's brother

DEATHS

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Robert Avalon, concert pianist, composer and brother of Mayor Bill White, died Friday. He was 47. He was diagnosed with testicular cancer on Thursday and died from cardiac arrest on Friday, his family said.

Avalon, who changed his legal surname, created and ran the Foundation for Modern Music from an office in Montrose. His passion was blending traditional and cultural art forms. He also encouraged other artists to compose their own material and improvise.

His greatest gift was as a teacher, family members said. Several of his students became accomplished musicians.

Drawn to Houston's diverse arts and culture, Avalon moved here from his hometown of San Antonio about 15 years ago. Well-traveled and fluent in Spanish, he spent a lot of his time in Mexico and Ecuador.

He also spent the past 15 years working on an opera.

"He never seemed to finish it," White said. "Like a lot of artists, he was not a practical person. When his car would break down, he would ride his bicycle all over town."

While in his early 20s, Avalon told his family he was gay.

"To my parents, who are very traditional, this was a shock," White said. "But they are also deeply religious and were taught that everyone is made in God's image, and that was a source of strength."

When his artist friends were diagnosed with HIV and AIDS, Avalon was often the first to offer help, White said.

Avalon, who was not particularly political, stepped up his activism when his brother ran for mayor. He stood by his older brother at an endorsement meeting of the Houston Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus. Avalon played the national anthem at the mayor's inauguration in January.

Avalon was working when he fell unconscious Friday. He had a heart attack while being taken to the hospital, was revived and had a second heart attack that led to his death, White said.

White said his brother had been in good health prior to his sudden death.

Avalon is also survived by his parents, Gloria and Bill White, and his longtime partner, Wayne Dockery. Funeral arrangements had not yet been made late Friday.