

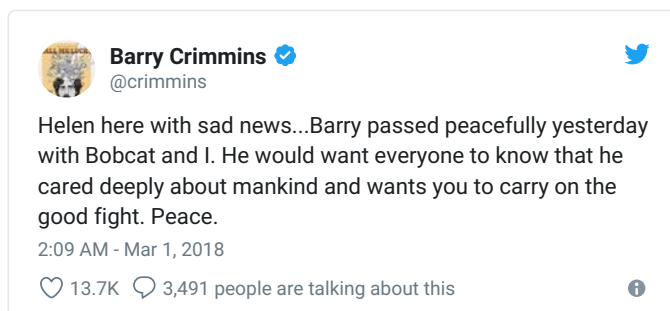
OBITUARIES

Barry Crimmins, Comic and Warrior Against Sex Abuse, Dies at 64

By NEIL GENZLINGER MARCH 1, 2018

Barry Crimmins, an outspoken comedian who, as a result of his own traumatic experiences in childhood, also became an outspoken opponent of child pornography and internet services that enable it, died on Wednesday in Syracuse. He was 64.

His wife, Helen Crimmins, announced his death on Twitter. In January Mr. Crimmins revealed that he had cancer.



Mr. Crimmins was a central figure on the Boston comedy scene as it blossomed in the 1980s, not only performing but also booking comics for the Ding Ho, a Chinese restaurant in Inman Square, where he was largely responsible for establishing a comedy club in 1979. His stand-up material was full of strong opinions on politics and social issues, a style less familiar than it is now.

"Before a lot of these guys like Bill Maher, Jon Stewart, he was one of the first guys that really would nail that kind of thing," the comedian and writer Paul Kozlowski said in a 2015 documentary about Mr. Crimmins, "Call Me Lucky."

Mr. Crimmins went from comic to activist in May 1992, when, during a performance at Stitches in Boston (another club Mr. Crimmins booked), he revealed that he had been raped as a child by a

man who knew his babysitter. The Boston Globe called the admission “perhaps the most highly charged and soul-baring monologue ever staged in one of the city’s comedy clubs.”

He later wrote about the subject for The Boston Phoenix.

Mr. Crimmins became alarmed when he went to research sexual abuse on the just-evolving internet and found that child pornographers were trading images and observations in the newly created chat rooms of AOL.

By 1995 he was expert enough in the subject that he testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee, calling AOL “the key link in a network of child-pornography traffickers” that was growing rapidly. At the time, many of the senators had only a vague knowledge of the internet and its dangers.

“The proliferation of child-pornography trafficking has created an anonymous pedophile superstore,” he told them.

Investigators and AOL began cracking down on the abuses. Mr. Crimmins recently expressed some satisfaction with the role he had played in bringing the problem to light.

“There’s kids who would have been harmed who weren’t harmed,” he told The Globe. “The bus never hit them.”

Mr. Crimmins was born on July 3, 1953, in Kingston, N.Y., to Phillip Crimmins and Margaret Hooe. He grew up in Skaneateles, N.Y., in the Finger Lakes region near Syracuse.

“ ‘Skaneateles’ is an Indian word that means ‘beautiful lake surrounded by fascists,’ ” Mr. Crimmins used to say in a typically caustic joke.

He was raised in the Roman Catholic Church and was no fan of it, often skewering it in his act. He was also no fan of Ronald Reagan, who assumed the presidency in January 1981 just as Mr. Crimmins’s career was accelerating.

“Our international policies under Reagan are great,” he joked. “Central American policy’s tremendous: If people are hungry, kill them.”

At the Ding Ho he booked comedians like Steven Wright, Paula Poundstone and Bobcat Goldthwait while also pursuing his own stand-up career.

“He wasn’t the most successful comedian in Boston,” Dana Gould, a writer and comedian, said in “Call Me Lucky,” which was directed by Mr. Goldthwait. “He was like the president of the scene.”

Mr. Crimmins also opened for the singer-songwriter Jackson Browne on a 1988 tour, as well as for other musicians like Billy Bragg. But as the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, friends noticed that Mr. Crimmins’s stage act was growing less funny and more harsh, full of ranting and badgering of audience members, as if wrestling with some kind of inner demon.

Then came his confessional performance in 1992. Mr. Goldthwait told The New York Times in 2015 that he first started thinking about making a movie out of Mr. Crimmins’s story years ago, initially envisioning a scripted film. But his friend Robin Williams suggested that he try it as a documentary. Mr. Crimmins didn’t hold back, Mr. Goldthwait said.

“He really opened up his whole life to me, and he trusted me,” he said in a telephone interview.

The two had known each other since Mr. Goldthwait and his friend Tom Kenny — who, like Mr. Crimmins, had grown up near Syracuse — asked if they could perform at a comedy show Mr. Crimmins had established in Skaneateles. Mr. Crimmins put them onstage even though they were

only teenagers.

“He just stressed that you had to be original,” Mr. Goldthwait said, the same demand Mr. Crimmins would later place on the many fledgling comics he booked in Boston.

Mr. Crimmins was also featured in a 2003 documentary, “When Stand Up Stood Out,” directed by Fran Solomita. In 2016 he released a comedy special, “Whatever Threatens You,” through the website of his friend Louis CK. His book “Never Shake Hands With a War Criminal” was published in 2004.

In addition to his mother and his wife, the former Helen Lysen, whom he married last year, he is survived by three sisters.

In recent months, Mr. Crimmins had been active on social media promoting a GoFundMe campaign for his wife, who also has cancer.

Ms. Crimmins, in a telephone interview, remembered Mr. Crimmins’s goofy habit of singing improvised songs all day long.

“It cracked me up,” she said. “He cracked himself up. He loved making himself laugh, and he was really good at it.”

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