

ustin friends mourn actress Amanda Blake - Austin American-Statesman (TX) - August 18, 1989 - page B1
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Austinites on Thursday remembered **Amanda Blake** - best-known as Miss Kitty in the Gunsmoke television series - as a brave, kind woman.

Blake, 60, died of cancer late Wednesday in Sacramento, Calif. She had battled the disease for more than 20 years.

"She was like family," said Rudy Cisneros, owner of Cisco's Restaurant, Bakery and Bar on East Sixth Street. "All my employees knew her. She was one of the gang. She liked to have fun and was full of life. You'd never know she'd had cancer for years. She was a very brave lady."

Cisneros said he first met Blake in a Las Vegas casino in 1968. They got together every time she came to Austin to do charity work for the Humane Society or the American Cancer Society.

Cisneros' restaurant was also the spot where Blake and then-Austin City Council Member Mark Spaeth announced their engagement on Jan. 8, 1984.

The couple had known each other for five years before they married on April 28, 1984.

It was Blake's fifth marriage and Spaeth's third. The marriage lasted less than a year, and Spaeth filed for divorce on April 26, 1985. Spaeth died the next month.

Doyle Nordyke, executive director of the Humane Society of Austin and Travis County, said that a fund-raising event for his organization served Cupid's purpose for the red-headed actress and the wealthy real estate developer.

"We had brought her in to do a couple of fashion shows," Nordyke said of the couple. "She and Mark sat next to each other on a plane when she was leaving."

Nordyke said Blake was down to earth.

"She'd come in here, sit on the curb or crossties and talk to the employees," Nordyke said. "It was a big morale-builder. She was very warm and easy to know. She was a real person. She really earned the respect of the people."

Danny Ingram, director of communications for the Texas Division of the American Cancer Society, said Blake was honorary chairwoman of the Texas Great American Smokeout in 1985. She led a rally in downtown Austin to help increase awareness on the dangers of smoking.

Blake had been a two-pack a day smoker until she was diagnosed with mouth cancer in 1977.

"She told us to let her know what we wanted her to do," Ingram said. "She made appearances in Dallas and Houston for local events. That's something that's above and beyond of what we usually

ask of an honorary chairman."

Cactus Pryor, who often served as master of ceremonies for the Humane Society fund-raisers, said he remembers when Blake was Austin's sweetheart in the role of the kind-hearted saloon owner.

"When TV first started, you made no social commitments when they showed Gunsmoke," he said. "She was as popular as any woman in the city. Everybody was in love with Miss Kitty, including me."

Blake was born Beverly Louise Neill in Buffalo, N.Y., on Feb. 20, 1929.

She attended schools in Buffalo, Gainesville, Ga., and Claremont, Calif., where she moved with her parents in 1943.

She studied acting at Buffalo's Studio Club and signed a contract with MGM while still a teen-ager. Her first film role was in the 1950 Stars in My Crown.

She was at CBS when she heard the successful Gunsmoke radio show was being made into a television pilot in 1955.

Set in the lawless cattle town of Dodge City, Kan., in the late 1800s, Gunsmoke was one of television's original "adult Westerns" - more violent, saltier and sexier than the cowboy fare offered young viewers in the mid-1950s.

The show's original cast starred James Arness as Marshal Matt Dillon, Dennis Weaver as his limping deputy, Chester Goode, Milburn Stone as "Doc" Adams and Blake as Kitty Russell, the throaty-voiced owner of the Long Branch.

This article was supplemented with a report from The Associated Press

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