

In Memory of Mayor Rizzo

► Art may imitate life, but a bronze statue of the late Mayor Frank L. Rizzo is even better. The legendary politico would love it.

By Tom Waring
Times Staff Writer

The Far Northeast's John Rifkin was a big supporter of the late Mayor Frank L. Rizzo.

"He was a people's person from day one," Rifkin said. "He was the greatest mayor Philadelphia will ever have."

Since he's such a Rizzo fan, there was no way Rifkin was going to miss last Friday afternoon's tribute to his hero. About 200 Philadelphians braved the cold to watch the unveiling of a 9-foot-tall bronze statue in honor of Rizzo.

The New Year's Day ceremony was timed to coincide with the Mummers Parade. As mayor, Rizzo had increased prize money for the Mummers.

By tradition, Philadelphia's mayor leads the first string band up Broad Street to the judging area near City Hall. After its performance, the Broomall String Band followed Mayor Ed Rendell to the steps of the Municipal Services Building.

There, the crowd counted down from 10 until workers removed blue plastic tarpaulin to reveal the work of sculptor Zenos Frudakis.

The reviews were unanimous. Everybody loved the Rizzo statue.

"It's great. It's beautiful," said Carmella Rizzo, the former mayor's widow. "It couldn't be any nicer. He deserves it."

Added City Councilman Frank Rizzo (R-at large), the late mayor's son: "Zenos did a great job. It's how I remember my dad best."

Mrs. Rizzo worked with Frudakis on some of the finer points of the statue, including making sure the sculptor placed a watch on the mayor's wrist and didn't put wrinkles on his suit.

RIZZO STANDS TALL

As a model for the statue, Frudakis used a picture of Rizzo waving to the crowd during the 1972 St. Patrick's Day Parade.

The 2,000-pound statue depicts the burly Rizzo descending the steps of the Municipal Services Building, at 15th Street and JFK Boulevard. The statue faces the

north side of City Hall. A monument committee raised \$150,000 to pay for the statue's construction and would like to raise \$50,000 more for its maintenance.

A movement remains to name the Municipal Services Building after Rizzo. City Councilwoman Joan Krajewski (D-6th dist.) introduced a bill to that effect, but it has gone nowhere. Councilman Rizzo said the bill might pass now that Councilwoman Anna Verna, a South Philadelphia Democrat, will likely be the next council president. Also, it's possible that Rendell could issue an executive order.

Rizzo rose to prominence in the 1960s as the city's no-nonsense police commissioner. He used that as a springboard to his election as mayor in 1971. He served two four-year terms, but the Home Rule Charter barred him from seeking a third consecutive term. In 1978, Rizzo lost a bid to change the charter that would have allowed him to run for a third term.

Rizzo returned in 1983 but lost the Democratic primary to Wilson Goode. He became a Republican in 1987, narrowly losing to Goode in the general election.

After that, Rizzo became a radio talk-show host on WCAU (1210 AM). In 1991, he returned to politics, upsetting party-endorsed Ron Castille to win the GOP mayoral primary. In July of that year, early in his campaign against Rendell, the 70-year-old Rizzo died of a heart attack at his campaign headquarters.

Rizzo was always popular in the Northeast. Holmesburg's Betty Foley, who was at the statue ceremony, called Rizzo a "problem-solver."

"I think he was a good guy," Foley said. "He knew how to run the show."

HAIL TO THE CHIEF!

Sister Dorothy, who works at St. Hubert High School, said she remembers Rizzo for his personal dealings with citizens.

"He knew how to handle people very well," she said.

West Philadelphia native Paul Bachetti wore two campaign buttons touting his favorite former mayor. One said "Rizzo Forever"; the other said "Rizzo '91."



Rendell said Frudakis did excellent work capturing Rizzo's spirit, leadership and vibrance. He thought Rizzo would have liked the statue.

The mayor hailed the artistic creation as a fitting tribute, considering that Rizzo was a dominant figure for a quarter-century. In fact, Rendell called Rizzo the most influential Philadelphian since the city's founder, William Penn.

Rendell said Rizzo's popularity was demonstrated after his death, when thousands of people attended his viewing at the Cathedral-Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul.

As for the placement of the statue, Rendell said there is no better location than outside a building that provides services.

"Frank Rizzo believed that government can make a difference," he said.

Two men who hope to succeed Rendell as mayor attended the ceremony. Former City Council President John Street is expected to announce his candidacy soon. And Marty Weinberg, Rizzo's campaign manager, probably will announce his candidacy later this month.

Weinberg, a former city solicitor and Democratic City Committee chairman who knew Rizzo as well as anybody from 1969 until his death, said Rizzo was like a brother and father to him. When Rizzo was police commissioner, Weinberg predicted that he would be the city's next mayor.

The statue is in an ideal location, Weinberg said, because it's easily visible for motorists and pedestrians.

"It's a perfect setting," he said.

Joe Rizzo, a former city fire commissioner and the late mayor's brother, said the statue's pose is appropriate.

"Waving, that's the way he was," Rizzo said. ♦♦