

by Becky Johnson

Dominican Hospital is the most dangerous place to give birth in Santa Cruz County if you are poor or homeless. Ask the homeless and poor women who have had their newborn babies "removed" by agents of the Child Protective Services (CPS).

On December 3, 1993, Heather Hanson, a woman on SSI, gave birth to a nearly eight-pound, healthy, biracial baby girl. Heather had been seeking the services of midwives and was planning a home birth; but her daughter was born six weeks early, effectively ruling out a home birth.

So Heather delivered at Dominican Hospital, only to have her baby taken away when only four days old. Ethyl Lewis, a longtime CPS worker, and Deputy Sheriff Don Kester wrenched her baby from her arms shortly after birth. Later, Lee Gulliver, attorney for her child, wrote the papers to make the seizing "official." Heather has seen her baby only once when she was three months old, and her daughter is still living at a foster care home at an undisclosed location in Watsonville.

Did Heather kill someone? Was she criminally insane? No. She had lost her son, now age seven, in New York State, and Child Protective Services in Santa Cruz reasoned that if she lost one baby, she should lose the next.

Surely there is an epidemic of abuse and neglect of children by their parents, sometimes justifying government intervention into family life. Yet the alternative — placing children in foster care — is questionable. In as many as 50% of cases, care is less than adequate. Reunification rates are alarmingly low. Whether the government

can do a better job than stressed-out parents is seriously in doubt.

Was Heather unfit to raise her son? Her brother, who resides in Oxnard, thought not. "Heather is not the same person now as she was before CPS took her babies," he said. "She has undergone a major personality change. She would never have been abusive to her children. She could have cared for them herself, if she had been given a little help." He added, "Heather is mentally ill and belongs on SSI. She has low tolerance to stress. But she should not have lost her babies."

Tama Perlman and her fiancée, Gideon, whose portrait appeared on the cover of the October, 1996, *Street Spirit* (when Tama was pregnant), gave birth to a healthy, beautiful baby girl on Jan. 13, 1997, at Dominican Hospital. Perhaps because Tama had been homeless for much of her pregnancy, she had been repeatedly tested for drug use at all eight of her prenatal visits through the Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency. All eight tests were negative.

At the birth, Tama and her newborn daughter were again tested for drugs. Both tests came up negative. Yet, 24 hours after giving birth, J.M. Rodrigues of Santa Cruz CPS arrived at the hospital with a uniformed sheriff's deputy to take Tama's baby into "protective" custody because the baby was "exhibiting symptoms of withdrawal."

"It was a shock," Tama said. "I'd just had a baby. I was really exhausted. It was like I was in a dream — a nightmare." There was some evidence of fetal distress at the birth, as meconium was present. The staff told Tama they needed to clean the