

# Hunger Strike in Santa Cruz

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lems. All that white sugar and sweetened baked goods only exacerbates the dental decay. No vitamin A, C, or potassium is in such a meal, and very little protein.

The next morning, the dirty, garage-style door opened at 8:00 a.m. sharp to the delights of cold cereal. One large box of what looked like fruit loops was dished up, one small bowl per person. On this morning, powdered milk was provided, in a big bowl, which resulted in a big mess of spilt milk and milk powder. Black coffee, white sugar, donuts, hard bagels, and stale bread were again offered as the morning before.

One straggler came in before the 8:30 a.m. closing time only to find the fruit loops box completely empty. "I missed breakfast!" she wailed. No one offered to open another box for her. As with the day before, no one got seconds.

Rice doesn't understand this type of neglect. He explained, "There's one feeding program in this town where the food is good, there's plenty of it, it's clean, and the people who serve it are kind and gentle. That's the St. Francis Soup Kitchen."

There, lunch is served promptly at noon, five days a week, as part of the Catholic social service outreach to the poor.

Although the HSC day center serves around 200 people daily, there was no drinking fountain. "If you want a drink of water, you have to drink out of the faucet in the bathroom or out of the mop bucket sink." Lou fasted for a drinking fountain.

During eight months of the year, the only shelter for homeless people in Santa Cruz is in the ISSP, the program which houses homeless people in area churches at night. Only 28 spaces exist each night for the 500 to 1500 homeless of Santa Cruz. Lou fasted to increase shelter space.

Homeless activists locally have called for a carpark and a campground for homeless people to increase available shelter. Other options include bringing more churches on in the summer program. The situation has become particularly pressing after more than a dozen anti-homeless beatings since January, not solved, with no offer of sanctuary or safe sleeping places from the Santa Cruz City Council, and an 11 p.m. to 8:30 a.m. ban on outdoor and vehicular sleeping.

Many speculated that outgoing Executive Director Karen Gillette was the true target of Rice's hunger strike. On day 18 of the fast, a television crew interviewed Rice. As they did so, Gillette, who had run the Homeless Services Center for seven years, walked by to get her mail. The crew attempted to interview Gillette about the hunger strike, but she declined, leaving the crew to videotape her back as she walked hurriedly away.

But Rice denied that his fast has much to do with Gillette or the board of directors.

"This is not about people," he explained. "This is about conditions. The conditions need to improve, and that includes how the staff treats clients. If

they don't care — and excuse me for using that four-letter word — about the people in their programs, they should probably find another profession."

Refusing to leave his spot at the Santa Cruz Main Post Office, Lou Rice held court with Diane Low and Don Lane of the HSC board, and City Councilmembers Chris Krohn, Keith Sugar, and Tim Fitzmaurice. Mayor Katherine Beiers, who also holds a seat on the board of the HSC, visited him twice. On her visit on May 4, she promised Rice that the drinking fountain would be installed and a dietitian appointed to supervise the Free Meal feeding program.

Rice was hopeful his goals would be accomplished and he could begin eating again. But one homeless man who came by shook his head and muttered, "You'll be dead long before they do shit! You're giving your life up for nothing."

When he was 23 days into his fast, Rice said, "I slept very well last night. I've written letters to my loved ones, and I am at peace. I believe Katherine Beiers will come through, but if not, I have no regrets, and I don't blame anyone."

Donna Maurillo, president of the Homeless Services Center, stopped and talked to Rice at length without revealing she was president of the HSC board. Forty-five minutes into the interview, Rice told her, "You don't know very much about homeless issues." She then revealed her position on the HSC board.

On day 27 of Rice's fast, Ron Cole, the incoming executive director of the HSC, pulled his car in front of the Santa Cruz Post Office. He introduced himself to Rice, told him he respected what he was doing, and invited him to come and see for himself the changes already made at the HSC, and the ones about to be made.

Lou Rice rode over to the HSC in Ron Cole's car, and was shown a shiny, new drinking fountain being installed. Cole also showed Rice new hygiene methods introduced in food preparations, as well as the plans for a permanent kitchen already budgeted. He said he knew that shelter for the Santa Cruz homeless community needed to be expanded and that he would lobby vigorously for it. He agreed to deal with all of Rice's seven concerns.

So on May 13, after 27 days of no food, Lou Rice broke his fast with a bowl of soup. He had brought the focus and the attention of the community to the conditions at the Homeless Services Center, enabled the new director to advocate strongly for the needed changes, and proved to all what even one, very determined individual can accomplish.

Said Rice of his personal motivations for doing the hunger strike: "I just couldn't forgive myself for not doing something."

To check in with the HSC and encourage them to keep their commitment to Lou Rice, call them at (831) 458-6020.