

Compassion from the Strangest Places

As head of the Chamber of Commerce, Michael Schmidt was the least likely person to advocate safe sleeping zones for the homeless. But that is exactly what he is doing.

by Becky Johnson

Where can the homeless sleep in Santa Cruz after the City Council shut down legal encampments and criminalized sleeping and camping in public? Since former Santa Cruz Mayor Mike Rotkin (an avowed "Marxist-feminist") closed the Coral St. Open Air Shelter in December of 1995, there has been no answer. Councilmember Scott Kennedy, a self-described follower of Gandhi, was there by his side to "help" people into the street. Liberal Mayor Celia Scott did not put the sleeping ban on the agenda her entire year as mayor. Mayor Katherine Beiers did not vote to end the Sleeping Ban even though she had the votes.

With the election of new councilmembers Christopher Krohn, Tim Fitzmaurice and Keith Sugar, many gave a sigh of relief for the homeless. But when push came to shove, homeless people got pushed and shoved away. Under Mayor Keith Sugar, elected last November, the Sleeping Ban was retained, no new shelter was created, and so far the City Council has done nothing about the beatings of at least 51 homeless people in Santa Cruz in 1999.

It has been an exceptional year to be homeless in Santa Cruz — exceptional-

ly bad, that is. First, housing costs are at an all-time high. Second, welfare cuts, General Assistance cutbacks, food stamp cut-offs, the gutting of Section 8, complicated new rules for getting SSI or SSD, and unprecedented eviction rates have thrown record numbers into the street.

Third, a series of vicious assaults victimized 51 homeless people out of approximately 1,000 homeless people

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in Santa Cruz. By comparison, people who live in houses have only a 1 in 1000 chance of being a victim of assault. Finally, death stalks the homeless. Santa Cruz recorded 19 known deaths of homeless people in 1999. (An unofficial estimate by the Santa Cruz County Coroner of homeless deaths in a typical year has been 10-12.) And now the winter rains are pouring down.

But sometimes help comes from unexpected quarters. Enter Chamber of Commerce CEO, Michael Schmidt. As head of one of the lead business associations, Schmidt had a reputation as

being the last person to be advocating for safe sleeping zones for homeless people. But that is exactly what Schmidt is doing.

"When I first came back from Vietnam, I lived in my Plymouth Barricuda," Schmidt said. "I understand what it is like to be homeless."

His homelessness, which was related to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, had caused him to be alienated from his

family. After six months or so, his family was able to talk him into getting the treatment he needed, and he was able to recover and reintegrate.

Schmidt witnessed a homeless man being beaten around Christmas. "I was walking from my office towards the downtown when I saw three or four skinheads beating up this poor homeless guy," he said. "I ran over yelling and they all ran, including the guy they were beating up. I later saw the man and he thanked me. He told me no one had ever intervened on his behalf

See **Safe Sleeping Zones** page 15

Safe Sleeping Zones

from page two

before me."

Schmidt has been tireless. He went directly to the Harvey West Neighborhood Association, which last year urged harsher enforcement of the Camping Ordinance, and got a standing ovation when he urged that safe sleeping zones be immediately established at the County Building parking lot next to the Sheriff's station, at a City-owned lot next to the police station, and in the upper levels of the City-owned parking structure #10 which is under-utilized at night.

In addition, Schmidt approves of the City setting up a permit system for those who must sleep in their vehicles at night, so the cops won't hassle them. His plan is to create immediate safe zones for homeless families, the elderly and handicapped, mothers with children, and people who are suffering from AIDS, and other vulnerable populations.

"I would like to be involved in this interim measure," Schmidt said. "I will try to get the Downtown Association and the Chamber of Commerce on board. If we wait four or five months more, we will have just that many more people getting beaten up, cold, and lonely."

Schmidt does not fool himself that there will not be strong opposition. Some homeowner organizations, he predicted, "will fight tooth and nail and they are well funded. But it's the right thing to do. Quality of Life is part of the mission statement of the Chamber of Commerce."