

A Fast for Those with Nowhere to Go

Fasting is a big deal for some wonderful seniors in their 80s who have joined us. Everyone is risking their lives for this cause. They feel they have done everything they can without meaningful results but they will not give up or shut up.

by Roxanne Acquistapace

I have asked myself a thousand times at several dozen dead-end meetings with the Santa Cruz City Council and on many icy cold, rainy nights: "How long can our city officials keep ignoring the plight of those who are so cold and vulnerable with nowhere to go?"

I campaigned for and voted for three men in the last City Council election that I believed were leaders that would work for changes that would make Santa Cruz a kinder place, but they are not leading us in that direction. For over a year, they have been pretending to address this issue without providing one solution that would offer some real relief to homeless people burdened and criminalized by our city's ban on sleeping and camping.

They did lower the fine for camping tickets from \$109 to \$54, but if you do not have any money or any way to get any, it doesn't matter. The warrant that goes out for your arrest when you can't pay is the same. I have been unable to view this one crumb as any kind of accomplishment.

It does, however, make those people who have never experienced homelessness wrongly think that there is progress being made. Those are the people that I spend my time trying to reach. I want to disillusion them, to cause them emotional distress when I describe for them what life is like for those who no longer even have a place to sleep at night. I paint pictures for them with words so they can never forget the hungry man, sun-blistered from overexposure, who picked cigarette butts and



Alene Smith photo

Protester challenges the Santa Cruz sleeping ban.

brown wet garbage off discarded donuts and ate them out of the Safeway garbage dumpster, his hands shaking as he gobbled his find.

When they tuck their children in at night, I want them to remember the newly homeless, pregnant mother and her two children who were frightened by some of the drug- and alcohol-addicted homeless at the shelters. The mom begged her social worker to help her get a Section 8 certificate or some emergency housing. Her social worker helped her by removing her two children from her custody because they were being exposed to people on drugs and then several

weeks later, after the mother delivered a child by Cesarean section, removed that baby from the hospital.

I still didn't feel that I had moved enough people so after a particularly disturbing City Council meeting on January 11, I began a long-term fast. David Silva, a long-time activist on behalf of the homeless, was announcing a rolling fast, where many people consecutively fast for a short period. I misunderstood what that meant and here I am on my 15th day of fasting as of this writing at the end of January. Some people are giving up dinners for a month, some are giving food up for a day. There are now over 50 people involved in the rolling fast in Santa Cruz.

I decided to stay on full fast because I believe in the power of personal sacrifice. I am a big girl who loves to eat! After 15 days of fasting, I am not waif-like enough to evoke anyone's sympathy. However, one look at me and you know that giving up food must be a *big* deal for me. It is a big deal for those on chemotherapy, for those with AIDS who cannot take medication without food, and for some wonderful seniors in their 80s who have joined us. Every one is risking their lives for this cause. They feel they have done everything they can without meaningful results but they will not give up or shut up.

The *Santa Cruz Sentinel* carried a story on violence against the homeless a few weeks ago and then covered our fast in last Sunday's paper. KION Channel 46 and the *San Jose Mercury News* interviewed some of the participants in the fast. I believe that each time a previously unconscious person sees these news snips and blurbs, they can no longer ignore the plight of their sisters and brothers. Each day someone new joins us.

All of the participants in this fast agree on the goal — immediate relief from the elements and from the police for the homeless. Most agree this means lifting the famously cruel camping and sleeping bans for immediate results, opening a public building for shelter on cold and rainy nights, and then the longer-term goals of more beds, meals and services will not be greeted with such skepticism by both the homeless and the activists.