

# Their Shelter Emergency Is Now Over Forever

**How did a city as elite and wealthy as Santa Cruz allow an 86-year-old woman to spend her last dying days out on the streets, homeless?**

by Becky Johnson

A rare break between rain storms allowed an outdoor gathering without ponchos and umbrellas at the Homeless Services Center in Santa Cruz on December 21. The event, though sunny, was far from this season's holiday cheer. The annual event was the solemn reading of the names of those who died while they were homeless, led by Homeless Services Center Executive Director Ken Cole.

The Homeless Persons Health Project documented homeless deaths throughout the year, and provided additional data on the deaths. The official count stated that 26 homeless people died in Santa Cruz County this past year; but the names of three more were added in making the list,



**A homeless man is sprawled right next to what looks like a final resting place. This past year, 29 homeless people died in affluent Santa Cruz.** Alene Smith photo

bringing the total to 29 deaths. Twenty-nine people whose lives were filled with fear, lack of privacy, lack of sleep, cold, hunger, and who were, too often, treated like refuse. Twenty-nine people whose shelter emergency is over forever. Twenty-

nine more homeless people the merchants and the westsiders living in \$500,000 homes won't have to look at anymore.

Two were in their 80s. One woman was 86. That an 86-year-old woman should have to live on the streets, home-

less, is shocking in itself. Surely, in a country as rich and powerful as America, and in a city as smugly elite and wealthy as Santa Cruz, surely we would not allow an elderly woman to spend her last dying days out on our streets?

But there it was. The name was read, the age was read. She's gone forever. Our shame will be with us forever as well.

Ten were confirmed deaths outdoors or in a vehicle. Twelve died in some sort of medical facility so that, at least, they were able to lie in a bed at the end. Only one was taken in by someone who cared; that one person was able to die in a private home where there was a little chance to do so in dignity and privacy. One died in jail.

Homeless death tolls are predominantly male and this year was no exception. But 26 percent of the people who died homeless in Santa Cruz County this year were women. Most deaths were in the 31-50 age range, a shockingly premature age to die in a nation where the average life expectancy is above 70 for the housed population.

Acute drug overdose remained the biggest single cause of death, at seven.