

Homeless Activists Nail a Plank in Green Party Platform

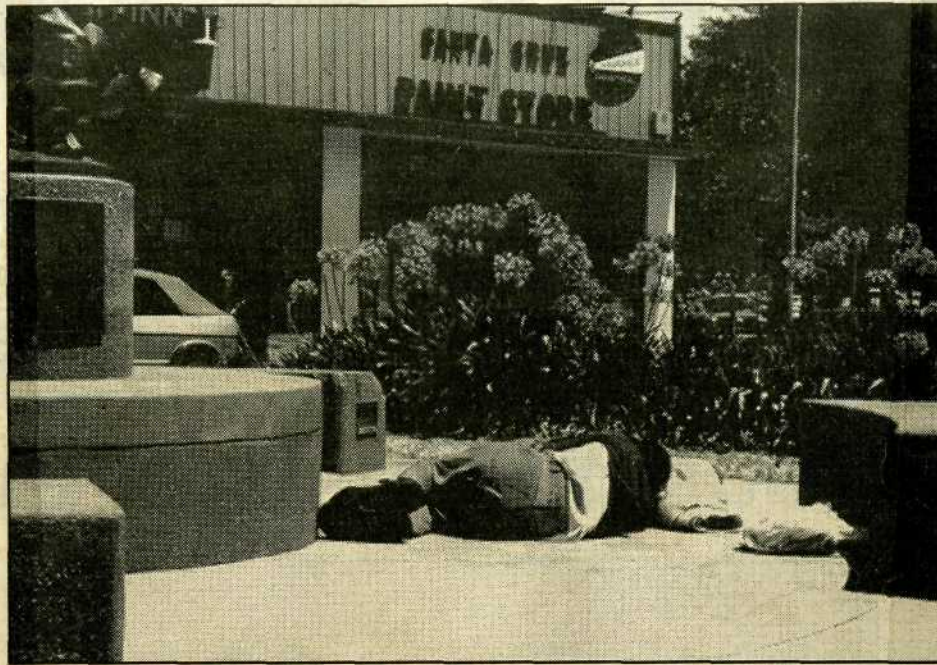
by Linda Lemaster

The Green Party is bringing its social-justice platform to life in Santa Cruz. It is not without struggle. One of the dichotomies at work is the natural divide between working in the system to change the world and overcoming the ways of the world. Recently, someone shouted at the General Assembly, "Are we a political party or a bunch of street activists?"

Any person registered as a Green voter can participate in the General Assembly (G.A.), where decisions are made. How many folks really show up and partake of this participatory democracy varies from month to month. The April 2002 G.A. had a number of things of concern to homeless folks on the agenda, and many passed, in stark contrast to the dynamics between Green homeless activists and other Greens a year ago.

Then, in May, the G.A. adopted a policy to hold candidates and elected officials accountable for their promises! It evolved because Santa Cruz City Council members who got Green Party endorsements while campaigning did not keep their word about the City's deadly law banning sleeping and camping. That ordinance historically has been selectively enforced to frighten and ensnare homeless people while peace officers ignore "paying" tourists asleep within their own private wheels.

The California Green Party and the world of homeless advocacy and survival have a few big things in common, from my view; still, the talking seems to come out as if they are polar opposites. If the Green Party were to embrace its own plank on overcoming homelessness, it would gain nearly as much publicity as it got having Ralph Nader bring the party together by running for president.



Homeless man sleeps on the sidewalk in downtown Santa Cruz. Alene Smith photo

Go save the ancient redwoods, yes, and all at-risk marine animals; save the water and shore and mountains, yes. But with each and every step, save the people, too.

A year ago in Santa Cruz, the local chapter of Greens had a hard time even getting a simple message regarding homeless folks endorsed in its G.A. In fact, it couldn't. The California Green Party created a hearty homeless plank in 1998, greatly influenced by local and longtime Green activist David Silva. It remained politically ignored here as elsewhere in California. Those who had it stuck in their faces seemed genuinely surprised that "their" party had such foresight [see www.cagreens.org/platform/].

Most active Greens, meanwhile, were pretty busy saving the redwoods, the sea lions and the local habitat. They didn't seem to want to be interrupted to help

save the poorest, most motley humans who had the audacity to expect to be treated as autonomous regular people.

To the local party's credit, Santa Cruz Greens overcame this impasse by forming the Homeless Issues Working Group (HIWG). But this group hardly did any better, despite a rich medley of youth, Nader campaign veterans, enthusiastic professionals and a lion's share of experienced homeless activists and survivors. With consensus as the Green Party's primary operating system, it felt for a long time to HIWG folks that nothing was getting done within the party's framework.

We then formed an "alter ego" called Grassroots Greens. The name says it all. The Grassroots Greens could act instantly

if required. They could use their individual consciences and just "go" when it's time to act. Carl Wilson of Grassroots Greens and Becky Johnson of Homeless United for Friendship and Freedom (HUFF) spearheaded a huge, tedious and lonely effort: building a database of friends of homeless folks.

Sure enough, last winter provided a great instance when the commitment of Grassroots Greens was urgently needed. The swelling San Lorenzo River flooded

out Camp Paradise, endangering the survival of the self-run homeless encampment. The Grassroots Greens and the local Quakers were the two groups prepared and unified and able to bring enough resources and muscle power to bear when the homeless encampment had to be moved throughout a river-rising night.

Finally, in April and May, 2002, the Santa Cruz County Green Party's G.A. resolutions became a political watershed.

It took a year, but consensus on homeless survival issues was reached at the April meeting. But one thorny issue remained, involving elected representatives who run as Green Party members or with the Greens' endorsement, but who violate important party policies once in office, especially on homeless issues.

Party members finished the most challenging item from April's agenda in May, by deciding that Greens shall hold politicians accountable who are elected with a Green Party endorsement, but then ignore their campaign promises. This culmination was entirely the result of the City Council's recurring snow job about the Santa Cruz camping ban. Hopefully it will prove a significant tool for getting the cruel laws repealed.

And the Greens didn't stop there. They endorsed with a cash contribution the Right to Sleep Summit held in Santa Cruz