

# A Lonely Death on the Doorstep

January 2005

## of City Hall

**When a homeless person dies outside the mayor's door, it is his own fault. That's the way the system looks at it.**

by Becky Johnson

**I**t was against the law to lie down on a bench, but that was the least of his problems. Robert Wagner, 58, of Santa Cruz was dying of cancer. A fatal tumor occluded his airway, and as he slept on a park bench directly outside of Santa Cruz Mayor Mike Rotkin's office, he died of asphyxiation.

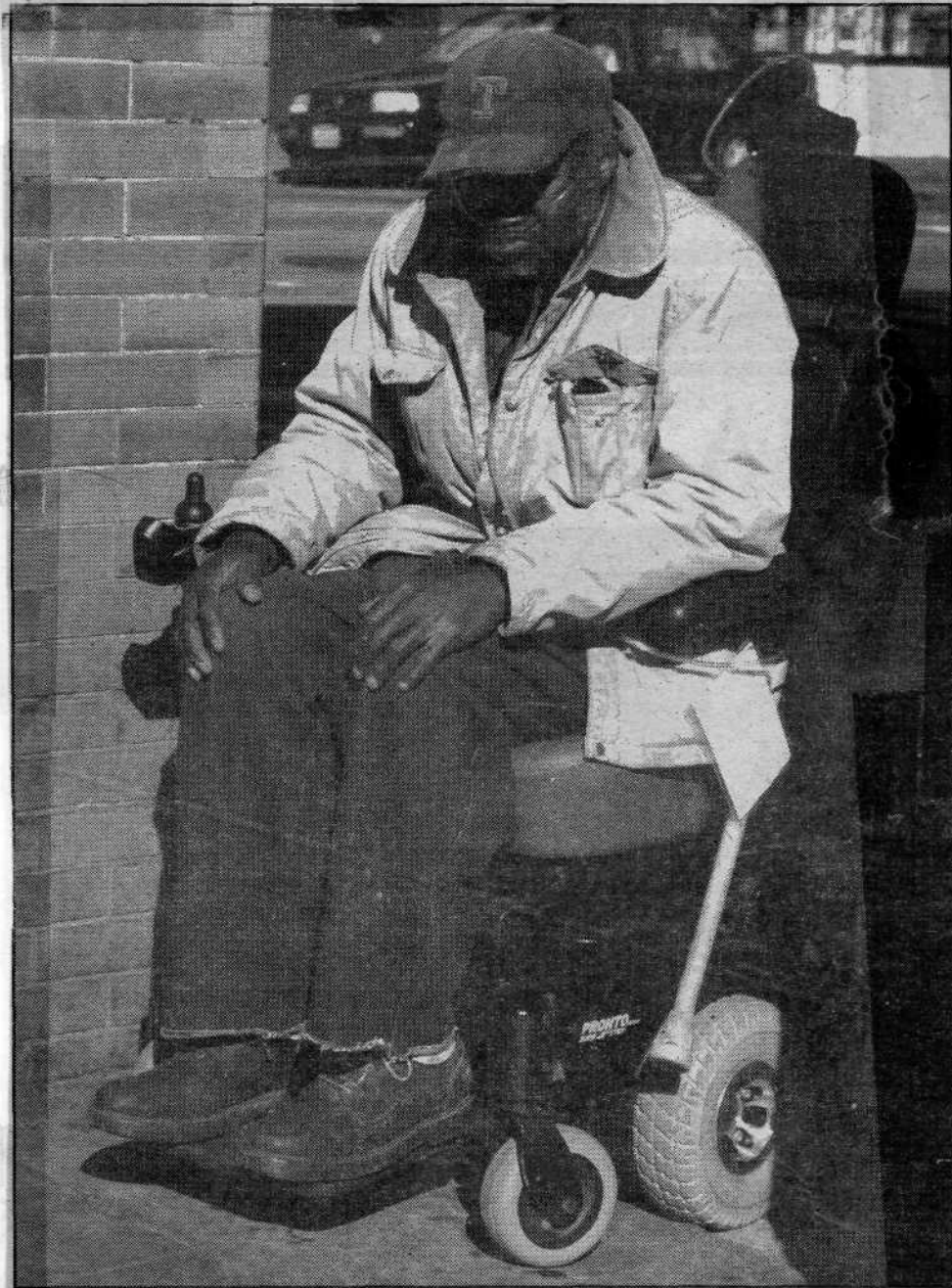
When SCPD Officer Venegas arrived on the icy morning of November 29, he found Wagner's lifeless body. The local paper described his history of alcoholism but made no mention of the cancer. When a homeless person drops dead on the mayor's doorstep, it is his fault. That is the way the system looks at it.

That line of logic tells us that the homeless person did something wrong in his life which resulted initially in his homelessness and eventually in his premature death. In Wagner's case, his homelessness stemmed from a divorce seven years earlier that had left him despondent.

Surely Mayor Rotkin bears no responsibility for the death of Robert Wagner.

Rotkin does support the Sleeping Ban which made it illegal for Wagner to fall asleep on that bench and to let his body restore itself in order to fight his cancer.

Rotkin also supports the blanket ban which means that had Wagner covered himself with a blanket on that frigid night, he would have been guilty of the crime of "setting up bedding." In addition, it is a \$162 crime to misuse a public bench. One may sit on it with one's feet on the ground. Put your feet up and it's a \$162 fine. Lie down, \$162. Fall asleep and it's \$54 for a homeless person.



**The war squanders billions of dollars needed for the poor, and results in more homeless veterans, some missing limbs and in wheelchairs.**

Robert L. Terrell  
photo