

Police Officer's Confrontational History with Homeless People in Santa Cruz

by Becky Johnson

In 1988, then-Officer Steve Clark of the Santa Cruz Police Department reportedly kicked a limping homeless man, John Miller. Clark advised Miller, "I used to be the kicker in high school," and told him that he'd kick the injured leg if Miller didn't leave town.

Officer Clark reportedly threatened a witness to another violent abuse against a homeless drunk shortly thereafter.

Also, in an incident witnessed by half a dozen people in front of the Old Bookshop Santa Cruz, Clark pulled his gun on a frightened but defiant skateboarder, using these memorable words, "Down on your knees and say your prayers!"

In 1995, shortly after the Citizens Police Review Board formed, John Malkin, one of its founding members, was ordered to "back off" by then-Sgt. Steven Clark who informed him he had "a file on him."

In 1996, when Anthony Patango, Pat Ring, and Dan Hopkins, all homeless, were awakened at 3:00 a.m. by Sgt. Steve Clark, he ticketed them for the "crime" of sleeping and of covering themselves with blankets.

As Clark seized Patango's blanket, the homeless man begged to keep it. "Please, it's my only blanket!" he said. Clark took it anyway. Later, when asked why he didn't just take a picture of the blanket for evidence, Clark quipped, "Because I can."

In 1999, when a homeless man, Robert Zesinger, committed suicide by hanging himself from a tree behind the Santa Cruz County Building in the dead of winter, Sgt. Clark told a *Sentinel* reporter, May Wong, that "D" Bob, as we knew him (The "D" stands for "drifter," he had once said), had died of an auto-erotic death, and that story was reported in the local paper.

Three months later, the coroner's report came out and confirmed that the death was a suicide. The Santa Cruz Coroner's office confirmed that there had been no evidence of an auto-erotic death, despite Clark's accusation which denigrated a dead homeless man unable to defend himself. A complaint filed with the Citizens Police Review Board exonerated Sgt. Clark.

In 1999, Clark hounded a homeless panhandler and former *Street Spirit* vendor, by brandishing his gun at Anthony Douglas and ordering him off Pacific Avenue.

In 2001, Christina Lafoya walked through a so-called park bordering a neighborhood basketball court in the Beach Flats of Santa Cruz. Clark detained her for "being in a park after hours."

Lafoya, who was brought up to know her rights, started asking questions; but instead of getting answers, she says she got abuse. "Sgt. Clark told me to shut up, sit down and put my face on the ground, while another officer got the K-9 unit out the car," she said.

Sgt. Clark has since been promoted to lieutenant.