

Model life of service

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THE EAST BAY has lost perhaps its most tireless advocate for the homeless. Susan Prather's recent death leaves a huge void. Gone is a woman who had no reservations about bluntly telling officials what they needed to hear to help those living on the streets.

The Richmond resident died last month after a short battle with a fast-moving gastric cancer. She was 57. We should all learn from Prather's example of reaching out to help others.

Prather's crusade began in the 1970s, when she met a homeless man at a senior meals program. What started by helping just one person culminated in 1999 when she and her husband, Bill Lunghi, launched Fresh Start, a program based in a Walnut Creek church that offers clothes, meals, showers and information to the homeless. The program was made possible by a \$250,000 donation willed to the city of Walnut Creek by a Rossmore woman who wanted to help the homeless. But by 2002, thanks to Prather's tenacity, it had become a self-sustaining nonprofit.

Along the way, Prather made an indelible impression on those she met. "She was very willing to be critical of unmet needs," said Contra Costa County Supervisor Gayle Uilkema. "There's no question she wore her heart on her sleeve."

Prather was always aware that many of us are just a paycheck or two away from being homeless — that salaries in the Bay Area are often inadequate to pay for housing. Attorney Osha Neumann of the East Bay Community Law Center joined Prather when police raided homeless encampments.

The homeless trusted her, Neumann recalled. "They could tell there was no way she was going to try to put them in an institution or into some program they didn't like." And officials learned from her that criminalizing the homeless didn't help anyone.

Actor Ed Asner, whom Prather befriended in 1987 while they were demonstrating in Washington, D.C., on behalf of the homeless, became a big supporter of her work. "I hope as many people as possible come to recognize what her loss means to the homeless and will do a little something extra to make up for her absence," he said.

If you want to help carry on Prather's work, think about volunteering yourself or sending a donation in her memory to Fresh Start Trust Accounting, P.O. Box 681, El Cerrito, 94530. Services for Prather will be held at 10 a.m. Aug. 28 at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, 1924 Trinity Ave., Walnut Creek.