

Tenacious homeless advocate dies

By Tanya Rose
Contra Costa Times

Article Launched: 07/30/2008 08:52:40 PM PDT

Susan Prather, a tenacious defender of the needy who was known for walking into homeless hangouts to make sure everyone had everything they needed, died Tuesday after a short battle with a fast-moving cancer.

As director of Fresh Start in Walnut Creek, the 57-year-old Richmond resident reached out to Contra Costa's vulnerable, providing clothes, meals, showers and information leading them to resources. Fresh Start, run out of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, started a garden with donated plants, yielding the freshest of herbs and tomatoes for patrons.

But mostly, Prather was known for her dogged pressure on public officials. Once, she hired a small airplane to fly over downtown Martinez pulling a banner that said "Contra Costa County doesn't care about the homeless," her husband, Bill Lunghi said Wednesday.

She always acknowledged to the media that she wasn't "nice" in her quest to boost funding and services for the homeless countywide, calling it an "in-your-face" approach.

"You can't really be nice to be nice," she told the Times in 2004. But those who knew her well say she was the kindest of souls, and easygoing once you got to know her. Contra Costa County Supervisor Gayle Uilkema said news of her death was heartbreaking.

"She was very willing to be critical of unmet needs," she said. "There's no question she wore her heart on her sleeve ... she'd say, 'You need to do it this way or that way,' and was on full attack."

But when the county honored her with an award one year, Uilkema said it was clear Prather was uncomfortable with the praise.

"I never once heard her ask for anything for herself, and you could just tell she didn't want to be singled out like that."

Attorney Osha Neumann of the East Bay Community Law Center went out with Prather when police in Central County raided homeless encampments.

"She was able to be real with these homeless people and they trusted her," he said. "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."

He told of her going up against police officers during raids, making sure authorities were treating everyone like human beings.

"She did that without compromising," Neumann said. "She got them to see that criminalizing the homeless was nothing, that it didn't serve anyone — society, or them. And she did this in Contra Costa County, not Berkeley, where there are many advocates.

"She was a one-woman campaign. For her, it was like breathing."

Prather told the Times she met her first homeless person in 1976, a Korean War veteran named Duane whose situation persuaded her to fight for the homeless. She became a full-blown advocate when the homeless population boomed in the 1980s.

She worked a variety of computer jobs to make a living, and then Walnut Creek hired her to start a homeless program in 1999. Fresh Start became a private, nonprofit organization in 2002, and Prather ran it with her husband.

Lunghi said Prather's body is to be cremated, and the memorial service will be Aug. 28 at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, 1924 Trinity Ave., Walnut Creek.

Lunghi had one major concern — "She'd kill me if I didn't tell you this": Anyone can send a contribution in Prather's memory to Fresh Start Trust Accounting, P.O. Box 681, El Cerrito, CA, 94530.

"She would absolutely kill me if I forgot that part."