

Official Fought Battles Large and Small

A Legacy of 27 Years of Resolving Conflicts

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(This article was published upon Jim McEntee's retirement.)

In nearly three decades at the helm of Santa Clara County's Office of Human Relations, Jim McEntee tussled with a police chief, marched with labor legends and tried to strike the "N-word" from the public vocabulary.

But most of the battles fought and won by the man once called "the Jimmy Carter of Santa Clara County" never made headlines. Like the time he saved one man from going to jail -- and another from going to the morgue.

McEntee is set to retire this week after 27 years of pursuing his department's stated mission to "promote equality, justice and peace." The office of human relations offers services for immigrants and youth and programs to reduce hate crimes and violence. But one of the department's central missions -- and one of McEntee's great strengths -- is conflict resolution. "When you talk with people, they always work with you fairly," McEntee said. "We have to respect people for who they are."

McEntee remembers two East San Jose neighbors in the early 1980s feuding over a barking dog. McEntee went to the dog owner's house to find him drinking his way through a 12-pack of beer. "There was a gun on the table, and I said, 'What are you going to do with that gun?'" McEntee recalled. "He said, 'I'm going to blow that SOB's head off.'" McEntee talked some sense into the two men. The dog owner moved his pet to the side of the yard farthest from his complaining neighbor, and the neighbor moved his bedroom to the side of the house farthest from the dog. One potential homicide averted.

"We sometimes take certain people for granted until they're gone. Jim is one of those people," said San Jose Police Chief William Lansdowne. As the man in charge of making sure San Jose lives up to its billing as the safest big city in America, Lansdowne has referred hundreds of neighborhood disputes to McEntee's office. And when Vietnamese-American business owners in downtown San Jose several years ago planned an angry protest of a fellow merchant who had placed a pro-communist sign in his window, Lansdowne -- mindful of a similar display in Orange County that set off weeks of ugly demonstrations -- again turned to McEntee to calm the waters.

"The real magic that Jim brought to the table was his ability to negotiate and be respected as the person in charge," Lansdowne said. Things haven't always been rosy between McEntee and

law enforcement. In 1979, former San Jose Police Chief Joseph McNamara told the civil grand jury that McEntee was undermining cops by participating in rallies and publicly criticizing officers. Police were trying to crack down on low-riders cruising around King and Story roads, and McEntee started an observer program to monitor arrests.

McEntee also has occasionally strained his ties with the county officials he's tried to keep accountable. But with McEntee stepping aside, official accolades are pouring in. "I was hoping I could slip out quietly," he said ruefully. No such luck. Last week the county board of supervisors passed a resolution praising him for promoting "harmony and human rights for all residents." Today, well-wishers will gather at the Mexican Heritage Plaza to bid a happy retirement to McEntee and his wife, Ann, who retired last week after a decades-long teaching career.

Former Supervisor Sig Sanchez calls Jim McEntee "a champion of the little person," noting that McEntee helped craft many of the county's social programs. "He begins with the principles and navigates through the bureaucracy to get a job done," said Maha ElGenaidi, a member of the county Human Rights Commission, which McEntee's office supports. But tilting at windmills year after year takes its toll. "It's the type of job that you have to live in day or night," McEntee said, standing in his basement office near hand-painted posters with messages like, "I accept my uniqueness" and "I release all fears and doubts."

"I'm 72 years old now. You kind of feel the effects of doing this," he added. In the short term, he and his wife plan to travel to Europe and get ready for the birth of their 14th grandchild. But the couple will remain active in social causes, McEntee said.

"We're not just going to pull up a chair and sit in front of the TV," he promised. With the recent war in Iraq, ongoing terrorist fears and racial tensions, McEntee said the work of the human relations office is more important than ever -- and will be tougher than usual in the face of budget cuts that will trim two of the department's staff of 17. Delorme McKee-Stovall, who coordinates the human relations office's Network for a Hate-Free Community, will be McEntee's interim replacement. McEntee said whoever lands the job full time had best keep an eye cast to the spiritual side of life.

"What's been very important to me is to look upon it as a ministry: serving God by serving others," he said. McEntee spent 16 years in the Roman Catholic priesthood before leaving the clergy in 1973 to marry his wife, a former nun. The couple have raised a multi-ethnic family of eight children: four Latinos, two African-Americans and two birth children of their own. Supervisor Blanca Alvarado said that's helped qualify McEntee to be the conscience of a county where no ethnic group is in the majority. "People just gravitated to him instinctively because there was this sense that he loved all people regardless of their status in life," she said.

Fluent in Spanish, McEntee worked closely with Cesar Chavez and with the late Bob Gonzales, father of San Jose Mayor Ron Gonzales. Over the years, McEntee has stuck up for field workers, people of color, gays and the homeless. Said Alvarado: "He was always one of us."