

A tribute to Jim McEntee, a powerful voice for the poor

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"Jim was a powerful 'voice for the homeless.' He played a central role in the formation of Emergency Housing Consortium and was a powerful resource in the early days of the homeless movement," said Barry Del Buono, EHC's President and CEO. He was instrumental in establishing the armories as winter shelters for homeless people throughout the county, including Gilroy. He continued to mentor Del Buono and other shelter providers as they expanded their programs from emergency shelter to longer term housing programs for the poorest of poor people.

"From the experience of getting a major housing development built in South County, when he was a Catholic priest at St. Catherine in Morgan Hill, Jim learned from the experience how essential housing is to keep a community stable. ... I think that experience of building housing propelled Jim into helping homeless people," recalled Del Buono.

I hadn't intended my first column to be an obituary, but I want to mark the passing of Jim McEntee, who headed the Santa Clara County Office of Human Relations for 25 years. McEntee, 73, much loved by many here in South County, died in his sleep early Monday morning. He will be greatly missed.

As the director of the county's FEMA board, McEntee helped many front-line service organizations, such as St. Joseph Family Center, access much-needed federal dollars. Former Director of St. Joseph, Marge Albaugh, said McEntee was remarkable in that he "cared about everybody, especially the immigrant and the poor." She recalled that it was through "his intercession that we were able to get the funding we needed to get St. Joseph on its feet."

Current Director of St. Joseph, David Cox, mentioned that McEntee was one county official who truly embraced the entire county and cared greatly about Morgan Hill and Gilroy, (remarkable because when it comes to services and funding, South County struggles as the "red-headed stepchild").

Albaugh said that it was McEntee who came down to St. Mary's to deliver eulogies at the funerals of many Gilroy non-profit employees and volunteers who worked the front lines.

Another man told me he remembered attending Mass as a youth at Juvenile Hall where McEntee was assigned as a priest. Now a dedicated case manager working with homeless families, he remarked how much he loved McEntee and was inspired by him.

He recounted a story from the late '60s about a prominent Latino activist who delivered his impassioned speech to a crowded rally in San Jose in both English and Spanish. Police wrongly

took the activist into custody and had him confined at Agnew State Hospital, claiming he was "speaking gibberish."

After McEntee witnessed this, he later went to the mental hospital, gained entry, and "virtually kidnapped him to get him out."

Hearing the story, Albaugh chuckled and said it didn't surprise her. "If he believed in you, he went to bat for you all the way," regardless of any consequences he might face. Many others have stories of his insistence on working in the trenches. Albaugh believed his calling was to be "out in the field with the people."

In fact, true to his beliefs, his retirement party last year was not a swanky dinner at a nice restaurant befitting an official who had his kind of impact. Instead, it was a potluck in a public park, so that it would be affordable and accessible to everyone. He said he wanted it to be attended by the people he loved to work with most.

Poncho Guevara, part of a younger generation of social justice activists McEntee inspired, talked of how McEntee influenced his life very early on as he enlisted Guevara's father to get involved in such things as the Confederación de la Raza and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

"When I started working for the South Bay Labor Council, he mentored me in so many ways, but he especially carried so much water in helping to build the Interfaith Council."

"He lived a very full life, but the last chapters feel unwritten as he approached new journeys in retirement with his huge and beautiful family and new challenges for justice. He lives on in us now." Indeed.

As the winter shelter season will be upon us before we know it, let us act on his legacy and work to end the pain and suffering of our neighbors wrought by poverty and hunger.