

My Jim McEntee Story

By Gertrude Welch

I have never known anyone as totally committed to social justice, to peace and to human rights, to helping whoever came to his door, to making the world into Martin Luther King's "beloved community" as Jim McEntee. I will always treasure the years that I was privileged to work with him on the Human Relations Commission, the Friends of Human Relations, and on other peace and social justice organizations.

Jim McEntee's reputation preceded him long before I met him. While as Director of Migrant Ministry for the Council of Churches, I heard of an activist priest in Morgan Hill by the name of Fr. Jim McEntee, who was instrumental in the building of housing for farm workers. Then, in 1976 when the County Human Relations Commission was dealing with the issue of rent control, I testified before the Commission in favor of the issue. My testimony was welcomed by the Commission and by Jim, no longer a priest at that time, but the new Director of the Office of Human Relations. This was my first meeting with Jim, a meeting etched in my mind because of the obvious support he had for low income renter families in the County being threatened with raises in their rents.

My next encounter with Jim was in the early '80s when Jim was instrumental in persuading the County to humanely remove the homeless from the shores of the Guadalupe River, which was flooding, and get them into shelters. Jim established the organization, Help House the Homeless, and strategically, he arranged for meetings to be held at the Santa Clara County Housing Authority. He involved all the organizations that were working to help the homeless, including the Emergency Housing Coalition, which already was housing some homeless in an apartment building on Park Avenue and later in an old building at Agnew, the former center for mentally ill. Ten years later, in 1990, when the City of San Jose had a program to get the homeless living in encampments along the Guadalupe River into housing, Jim again was very involved for the County.

In 1984 when the Reagan Administration imposed a boycott on Nicaragua and was supporting the "contras" to fight against their own people, our Pledge of Resistance organization blocked the doors to the Federal Building, a planned act of civil disobedience. One of the observers of the action when many of us were arrested was Jim McEntee, determined to see that our civil rights were not violated. On hundreds of occasions since then, whenever there was a protest or demonstration, Jim McEntee was always present to make sure no one's civil rights were violated and that no one was injured due to police action or violent activity of the crowd. His very presence always seemed to calm an angry crowd. This also meant that his Office of Human Relations position was a 24/7 job, as many of the demonstrations were held after working hours and on weekends.

Because I was impressed with Jim's concern for civil and human rights, his compassion for the homeless and marginalized, I joined the Friends of Human Relations, an organization related to

the Office of Human Relations which supported some of the work of the Office of Human Relations. I also often had contact with Jim because my work on the staff of the Council of Churches found me attending many of the same meetings. Some of these meetings were the Santa Clara County Homeless and Housing Coalition, the Interfaith Council on Religion, Race, Economic and Social Justice and meetings of other human and civil rights community organizations.

After Supervisor Diane McKenna appointed me to the Human Relations Commission, practically all those meetings as well as committees of the Human Relations Commission which I attended were also attended by Jim as Director. Everyone always waited for Jim to join whatever meeting was assembling. No meeting ever started until Jim came in with the agendas and his enormously fat date scheduling book held together with rubber bands. Usually he had a story or joke to tell before the meeting started, which put everyone at ease, no matter how serious the meeting.

Jim was forever proud of the fact that the Human Relations Commission had never missed having a quorum. He always enjoyed telling the story of the time when the Commission was short just one person of making a quorum, and he sent Tom Sing, a deputy sheriff who was on the Commission, out with his sheriff's car to get the wayward commissioner. Jim also always enjoyed reminiscing about the many different Human Relations commissioners he had through the years and their idiosyncrasies.

When I was on the staff of the Council of Churches and trying to organize a Rotating Shelter Program for the Homeless in the churches of Sunnyvale and Cupertino, it was Jim who came to the meetings and urged the churches' participation. When the Ku Klux Klan came to San Jose, it was Jim who arranged for a counter demonstration. It was Jim who came to the many marches and rallies we held during the Iran-Contra War in the '80s. It was Jim who invited human and civil rights speakers to the Human Relations Commission meetings to educate us. It was Jim who attended nearly every ethnic event or celebration in the County. After 9/11 when Arabs and Muslims were being discriminated against and jailed without cause, it was Jim who stood up and spoke up for their human rights.

After Toni Sykes died---she had been Jim's long time aide or receptionist---I had the pleasure of volunteering in the Office of Human Relations until they hired another person to serve as receptionist. It was here I had the opportunity to observe at close range all the many great qualities that Jim possessed including:

- his compassion for the homeless and jobless and marginalized of Santa Clara County who came to the office for help;
- the peacemaker and conflict resolution specialist for the many who came to him with their conflagrations and problems with neighbors, relatives, bosses and community; and for whom he established the Dispute Resolution Program;
- the goodwill ambassador where he was called on to represent the County at official gatherings and community events;

- the incredible energy and know-how he possessed to put together a program that the Board of Supervisors wanted---often with very little notice;
- his great gift of communication;
- the respect paid to him by members of the Board of Supervisors;
- the labor, civil and human rights specialist where immigrants and the marginalized came to him for help and for whom he established the Citizenship and Immigrant Program;
- creator of other programs such as the Network for a Hate Free Community, the Institute for Non-Violence, the Youth Taskforce, the Commission on the Status of Women and the Jail Observer program;
- nurturer of other organizations such as the Asian Law Alliance, the Food Bank, the Emergency Housing Consortium;
- and made positive changes in United Way and the Santa Clara County Grand Jury.

Jim was also a "Priest in private practice." He truly lived the Christian gospel teachings---across all cultures. He had love for everyone from the lowliest to those in high places and loved them alike. He loved us all as we loved him. Jim spoke often of Martin Luther King's dream of a "beloved community" and that was what he was trying to create for the County of Santa Clara and far beyond.

Jim was deeply devoted to Ann, his wife, and family and was so very proud of each of them. He eagerly shared about family happenings and events and what was going on in the lives of each of them. Their home was always open to the community. Our Human Relations Commission and friends and officials from the County and Office of Human Relations programs had many happy times at their home.

I don't think Jim had any unfinished business. When we would talk about his retirement he would often say, "I don't want to retire until the Institute for Non-Violence is on solid footing." Jim had a passion for training young students in non-violence and human rights and he lived to see students at Gavilan College enrolled in the curriculum of the Institute for Non-Violence as well as efforts being made to introduce the Institute to other colleges and universities.

There is no way---absolutely no way---to even begin to elaborate on all of Jim's contributions to this County, to the lives of its people, to the organizations he has founded and/or nurtured and to the lives of each one of us who knew and loved him. His loss will be deeply felt for many years to come. My prayer is that I may in some very small way help to continue Jim's truly great legacy.