

Bridging Cultures

Valley human rights leader campaigned for homeless, poor

by Putsata Reang
Mercury News

To get to the heart of Jim McEntee, you could visit Santa Clara County's armories during winter, where the homeless find food and shelter.

Or stop by St. Catherine's Church in Morgan Hill, where he served as a Roman Catholic priest and later became a surrogate father to four children of a parishioner who had died. Or, head to any local peace march or human rights rally, where more often than not, he was onstage, preaching compassion.

"Every day, he was probably in 10 different places," said one of his granddaughters, Veronica Mendivil, 30, of Santa Clara. "He was always busy doing things for people."

McEntee, who was once called "the Jimmy Carter of Santa Clara County," died early Monday morning. He was 73.

McEntee was widely known for his work bridging cultures, advocating for the homeless, and calming tensions as head of the county's office of human relations, from which he retired last year after 27 years of service. He smoothed relations between the community and local law enforcement during officer-involved shootings, and settled spats between neighbors. It was McEntee who urged the county to open up its armories in the late 1980s to temporarily house the homeless during winter, a program that continues to this day. He was a master at conflict resolution, advocating for a way to solve problems by getting both sides to sit down and talk. He and his wife, Ann, were foot soldiers for every imaginable social justice cause, said Andrea Flores Shelton, senior policy aide for county Supervisor Blanca Alvarado. The McEntees were guests at her wedding last weekend in Santa Barbara, where McEntee died in his sleep.

"Jim and Ann, they were these ambassadors of good will for Santa Clara County," said Flores Shelton.

But what he did better than most anyone else, according to his family and friends, was open his heart and home.

Santa Clara County Executive Pete Kutas remembers how McEntee responded to the homeless people who drifted in and out of the county building during winter.



“He would buy them a cup of coffee or some soup while he made it clear to them we had cold-weather shelters.” Kutras said. “He didn’t just shuffle them off. He took time with them and talked to them as a person.”

McEntee was born in Oakland on April 9, 1931, to Mary and James McEntee.

In the eighth grade, McEntee decided to devote his life to religion and joined the seminary, said his brother, Ben McEntee. Jim McEntee’s passion for organizing and helping the poor emerged in his youth.

“When he would come home from seminary, he was always getting us involved in things,” Ben McEntee said. “He would take us to old St. Mary’s Church in the poor part of town, and we would organize a party for the kids. He would play Santa Claus.”

As a teenager, McEntee also worked on the local railroads alongside Latino immigrants. That’s where he first learned to speak Spanish, and where his exposure to immigrant workers fueled his mission to help the poor, Ben McEntee said.

In 1973, McEntee left the church after 16 years as a Roman Catholic priest to marry Annella Mainland, a former Roman Catholic nun. Even after he left the priesthood, he referred to himself as “priest in private practice,” his wife, Ann, said in an e-mail. “All his work in life was part of his ministry,” she said.

The couple have two birth children, Amy and Peter, six adopted children and served as foster parents to a ninth child

McEntee filled his life and home with advocates and activists from the labor rights movement to members of the gay and lesbian community, and friends from all walks of life including members of his parish, St. John Vianney Parish in East San Jose.

“He was always involved, always helping out in any way he could,” said Richard Chavez, brother of the late farmworker leader Cesar Chavez. “He was totally, totally committed to social justice.”

McEntee’s children remember going to multicultural events with their father, even anti-Klan rallies, and marching with Cesar Chavez. At the family’s San Jose home, the dining table --- which doubled as McEntee’s home office --- came with eight chairs and table leaves to make it longer. The McEntee children regularly pulled chairs from all corners of the house for guests.

“You never knew who was coming for dinner,” said Maria Jack, 47, one of his children, who remembered a homeless mother and her three children who came for Christmas dinner one year.

McEntee always kept an open-door policy. And when they weren’t home, McEntee and his wife left a key for anyone who needed to come in. “He was a giant man, and an exceptional human being,” said longtime friend, Rigo Chacon.