

County plaza dedicated in memory of human rights proponent James McEntee

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A long-planned dream came true, May 7, when the James P. McEntee Sr. Plaza was dedicated in memory of the man who was Executive Director of the Santa Clara County Human Relations Office for 27 years (1976-2003).

His widow, Ann McEntee, who serves as Chair of the Jim McEntee Legacy Committee, their children and grandchildren, and several hundred local officials and community members joined together for the dedication ceremony for the "Gathering Place for Peace."

The plaza, in front of the main county building at 70 West Hedding St. in San Jose, features an art project as a reminder of McEntee's gifts for peace-building.

"Peace," in fact, set the theme for the groundbreaking ceremony which took place two years ago and which marked the official start of the Jim McEntee Legacy Project.

He died unexpectedly in 2004 and in May 2005 the Board of Supervisors unanimously voted to name the plaza in his memory.

Then County Supervisor Blanca Alvarado said, in 2005, "Jim embodied the spirit of brotherhood. A great number of the gatherings, celebrations and programs Jim led took place here in the plaza.

"It is as though his spirit is already present. It is fitting that we celebrate his life by naming this plaza in his honor," Alvarado said.

McEntee's family and friends created the Jim McEntee Legacy Committee in order to explore ways to keep his legacy alive. Two aspects include an art project and a scholarship project.

The Art Project features a unique window depicting Jim's life and is installed at the plaza site. The Legacy Committee contracted with San Jose artist Carlos Perez and his Art Origin Design Team to design the artwork which depicts McEntee's message of peace, non-violence and respect for all people.

As reported two years ago, some 20 focus groups participated in the design process, with meetings held in a variety of locations and engaging the county's diverse groups.

In addition to the window, there is a square area, a "Gathering Place for Peace," featuring a dove in the center and eight benches facing the center. The circular placement of the benches encourages people to face each other and engage in dialogue.

The square is surrounded by tiles which are inscribed with donors' names, a quote, an icon, or a company logo. At the recent May 7 dedication event leaders from multi-cultural and ecumenical religious congregations and organizations paid tribute to McEntee.

Msgr. Eugene J. Boyle, long-time social justice advocate, led the inter-faith blessing and told of his 50-year friendship with McEntee, noting "Jim's tireless efforts to help people in need."

Newsman Rigo Chacon served as master of ceremonies and noted “Jim’s reconciling nature. He brought people and factions together. He always worked for the marginalized.”

Ken Yeager, President of the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors, said, “This is a place where all can come together.”

Supervisor George Shirakawa said, “Jim was a local hero. He had an ability to make you do what you didn’t want to do, but you did it!”

Supervisor Liz Kniss remarked, “Look around – this diversity of people here today is a beautiful reflection of Jim’s life. This place, this circle of safety is a most wonderful legacy.”

Supervisor Dave Cortese said, “There can be peace in the world when people come together, when religions and cultures cooperate. Jim had a way of bringing people together. When disparate groups were arguing and Jim arrived, you knew the dispute was over!”

Congressman Mike Honda called McEntee “a great man and an exceptional friend.”

A native of the Bay Area, McEntee was born in 1931, the oldest of eight children, attended local schools and St. Patrick Seminary, Menlo Park.

He was ordained to the priesthood in 1957 and served in local parishes including St. Catherine in Morgan Hill where he worked with migrant workers in the late 1960s.

In 1973 he married Ann and they raised a multi-cultural family of nine children -- two birth children, six adopted children and one foster child. The family has been active members of St. John Vianney Parish in San Jose.

McEntee was awarded the Diocese of San Jose’s first Lumen Christi Award at its first Justice Symposium in September of 2004. He was set to attend the symposium but died less than two weeks before. He was given the award posthumously, accepted by his wife Ann.

Jim McEntee’s career in public service is well known in the Santa Clara Valley. He helped build the Office of Human Relations and its Commission which received national recognition.

Under his direction the Homelessness Program was created, as well as the Dispute Resolution Program Services, the Youth Task Force, the Citizenship and Immigration Program and the Network for a Hate-Free Community.

McEntee was founding chairperson of the Second Harvest Food Bank and was one of the founders of the Emergency Housing Consortium in 1980.

He served on the Violence Prevention Task Force and as chairperson of the Emergency Assistance Network of United Way of Silicon Valley.

He served as a diversity trainer for over 11 years and created relationships with an array of ethnic and cultural groups in the county. He was known for his skills at conflict resolution and mediation.

McEntee was a founder and board member of the Interfaith Council on Religion, Race, Economic and Social Justice. He served on the first diocesan Human Concerns Commission and on the Catholic Campaign for Human Development committee.