

Reflections on the Life of Gertrude Welch

by Richard Hobbs, April 28, 2007
Gertrude's Memorial Service at
Campbell United Methodist Church



Gertrude Welch was a quiet leader and a faithful friend—an unassuming, ego-free model community member, a trustworthy and devoted companion to all of us, a citizen of our county, our nation, and our world, a citizen with a capital C. When current Human Relations Chair Johnny Khamis heard of her passing, he told me “She will be missed ... I will pray for her today.” Barby Ulmer from Our Developing World expressed: “I’m devastated to think I can’t call or email her for advice, confirmation, etc. What a loss!” Samina Faheem, Chair of American Muslim Voice and Chair of the Peace Building Committee of the Human Relations Commission stated: “She was always supportive of Muslims ... I want to be Gertrude when I grow up.”

I first met Gertrude in the late 1970s. She was an avid protagonist for peace and justice in Central America. We worked side by side and helped organize countless demonstrations against US policy in Central America. In 1980 she was a member of St. Paul’s United Methodist Church in downtown San Jose where we organized the first International Peace Fair, which will hold its 25th Peace Fair celebration this year in this church on December 1. I worked with Gertrude on many human relations issues. Gertrude was a founding board member of Human Agenda, a non-profit human rights organization located in San Jose and she served as the first President of the Board. I recall a study group we held in 2002 on the love ethic of bell hooks: an ethic of caring, commitment, knowledge, respect, trust, and responsibility. Gertrude was the embodiment of the love ethic. As late as last year, Gertrude chaired the meetings of the Jim McEntee Legacy Committee to create a memorial in Jim McEntee’s honor in front of the County Building.

Gertrude played a major role in human rights work in Santa Clara County. She worked with the county Human Relations Commission on many issues and was then recruited to the Friends of Human Relations in 1988 by the late Jim McEntee, Director of the Office of Human Relations. She received Human Relations Commission awards in 1986, 1987, 1993, and 1997, and a California Association of Human Relations Organizations Civil Rights Leadership Award in 1995. She was appointed to the Human Relations Commission by Supervisor Dianne McKenna and served two terms and two years as Chair of the Human Relations Commission. Gertrude was proud that while on the HRC she and others were successful in getting the Board of Supervisors to pass resolutions to end the sanctions on Iraq, and to support a moratorium on the death penalty. Also, in Gertrude’s words, she was proud of “Helping many, many community groups with human and civil rights.” Gertrude worked tirelessly with Ashraf Zahedi and others in 2001 to form the Network for a Hate Free Community in Santa Clara County, to address hate crimes. In 2005, after Gertrude left the Human Relations Commission, she was presented the James P. McEntee Sr. Lifetime Achievement Award.

Last year Gertrude and I discussed the issue of peace in Iraq. Working closely with Barby and Vic Ulmer and South Bay United for Peace and Justice, she carried the resolution entitled “Opposing the High Cost of War in Iraq to Santa Clara County” all the way through approval by the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors. I have vivid memories of the comfort I felt and the moral leadership she exercised when supporting the resolution before the Legislative Committee of the Board of Supervisors, just last June.

Yesterday I was with Supervisor Blanca Alvarado and she told me “What a shame to lose such a wonderful human being”. ***A wonderful human being.*** Jon Hellesoe, long-time staff member for Senator John Vasconcellos, wrote me: “So sad to hear of Gertrude’s passing. She was, and will always be a giant in our community.” ***A giant in our community.*** Former Human Relations Commissioner and Past President of CEMA Sheila Stevens wrote: “Very sad news to hear the passing of a mighty warrior.” ***A mighty warrior.*** Sanjeev Bery, San Jose Director of the ACLU of Northern California, stated “People like Gertrude are an inspiration to all of us young ‘uns seeking to build a better world.” ***An inspiration to all of us.*** Andrea Villasenor-Perry, former HRC Commissioner and now director of the youth division at Catholic Charities, wrote to me: “Gertrude was a role model for us in how to lead a spiritual life devoted to service. She was a faithful servant of God—someone who truly led by example...I knew Gertrude as a passionate advocate for peace and justice...” ***A role model. A faithful servant of God. A passionate advocate for peace and justice.***

Gertrude Welch. Let us all commit ourselves to the love embodied by Gertrude Welch: caring, commitment, knowledge, respect, trust, and responsibility. Let us all recommit ourselves to this wonderful human being, to be Gertrude Welch when we grow up.