

EARTHQUAKE '89 - Santa Cruz

Unexpected lodgers

Santa Cruz Elks open clubrooms as a shelter

By TRACIE WHITE
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IN THE Santa Cruz Elks Lodge meeting room, a large Elk's head trophy hangs on the wall, watching over a single man sleeping face down on a cot in the middle of the room.

Clothes and blankets are strewn around the chairs and tables which are arranged neatly in rows, silently waiting for the next meeting of the lodge.

Down the hall in the Elks card room, cots line the walls. A row of children and teen-agers lounges on a couch watching a video of "E.T."

One of the more glamorous shelters in the county to open following the Oct. 17 earthquake, the Elks Lodge has been transformed for almost two weeks into a lodge for more than 40 people — mostly families — left homeless. The temporary residents eat three hot meals a day in the spacious dining room overlooking a swimming pool. The food, prepared by Elks staff members, has included everything from bacon and eggs for breakfast to roast beef dinners.

"This place is just lovely," said Ceola Milliner, who has been staying at the shelter since it opened with her four grandchildren, who she is raising. "They spoil my kids, me too. Everybody's been sweet to us. I don't want to leave!"

Karen Aikins, 33, sleeps on the floor in the Elks office which is crowded with Pampers, aspirin and rows of toilet paper. A resident of Soquel, she's slept here every night for the past week and a half, as a full-time volunteer who stepped in to help coordinate the shelter.

With the help of a handful of Elks members and their wives, Aikins has made endless trips to the Food Bank in Watsonville, retrieved clothing donations from the Seventh Day Adventist church and the Salvation Army. She organized and passed out piles of supplies donated by the public.

With the Elks Lodge preparing for a wedding this weekend, Aikins is hoping to have most of the people out of the shelter and into homes by today.

"The Elks rely on banquets, weddings, parties and dances to keep them going," said Aikins. "They're not rich. They can't do this forever. We're trying to get people settled."

Since the earthquake, when the board of trustees first discussed opening their doors to quake victims, the Elks' regularly scheduled events have taken a back seat to the shelter. Thursday night meetings have been canceled, and the regular Monday night football dinners have been postponed, according to Norman Guilbert, Elks exalted ruler.

The two groups have also shared the facilities. Sunday night, the lodge held a '50s dance — complete with a 14-piece band — while families settled down for



Elk head mounted on the wall at Santa Cruz Elks Lodge faces over an unusual sight these days, a temporary shelter for earthquake victims and coordinator Karen Aikins.

the night in the card room to meet their 10:30 p.m. curfew. Tuesday night, the shelter residents took over with a Halloween party for the children.

"I don't think most of the members know we're doing this," said John Amin, a member of the board of trustees, who has been on hand to help out at the shelter. Santa Cruz Lodge No. 824 has more than 1,500 members. "The board decided to open up the facilities. We saw we had space available, and there were families and children who needed it." Bill Simas, the lodge secretary, said he called the police department and the Red Cross a few days after the quake, "and the next thing you know we're getting supplies, and the next thing you know people started showing up."

Aikins arrived on the front steps of the Elks Lodge with a carload of food on the Sunday following the quake. She had been bounced from the Civic Auditorium to the Messiah Lutheran Church to the Portuguese Hall, trying to find a shelter in need of her donations.

The men at the lodge were watching a football game when quake victims began showing up at the door, Aikins said. "They just started asking me all these questions. They thought I was from the Red Cross," said Aikins, who is not affiliated with any organization. "Where should we put this stuff? What should we do? I just knew I should come back the next day."

Monday, Oct. 23, she moved into the lodge.

Trained as a minister in "spiritual healing" with administrative experience as a store manager, she just stepped into the role of coordinator at the shelter.

"I gave up my job for two weeks," said Aikins, who teaches

spiritual counseling in Santa Cruz, San Jose and Monterey. "I can't pay my own rent."

Aikins has been trying to work with county agencies and other organizations to help locate homes and jobs as needed for the shelter residents. "In the meantime, we try to make them as comfortable as we can here," she said.

Many of the shelter residents were just able to get by before the earthquake hit. The damage caused by the quake sent them falling through the cracks, said Aikins.

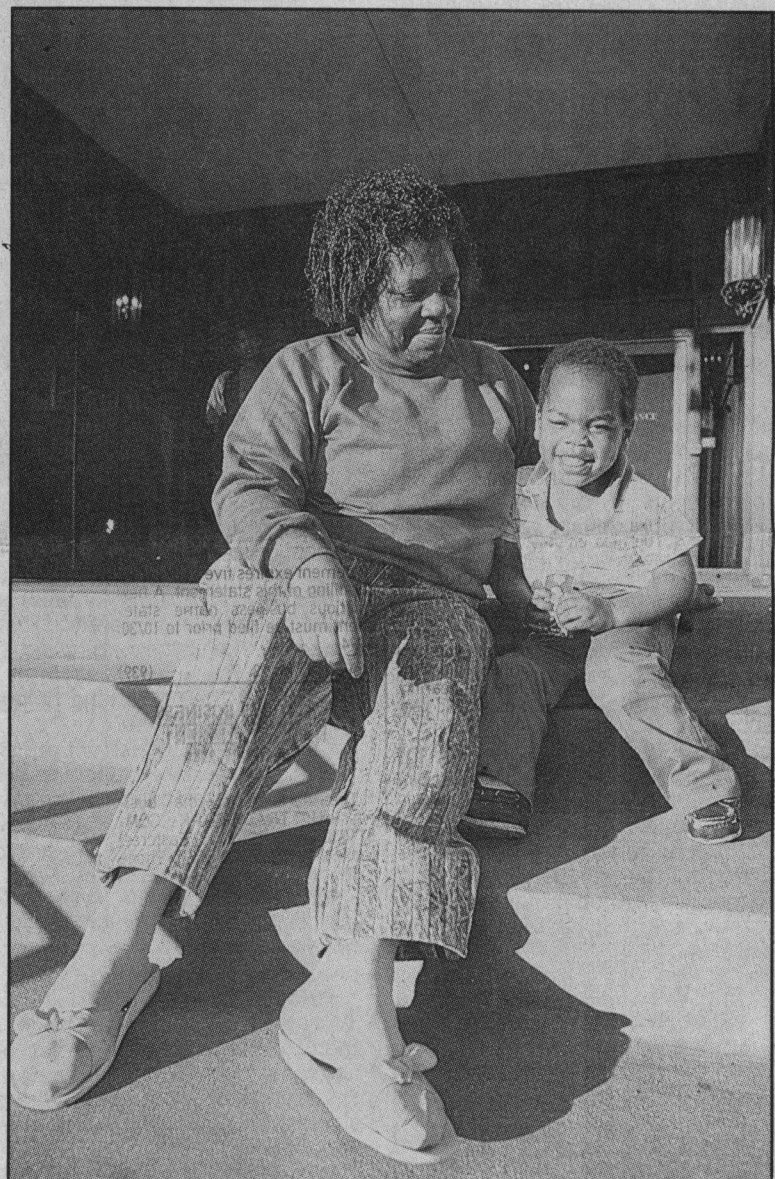
"We have two young mothers — a 16-year-old girl with a 4-month-old baby. We have people whose homes were demolished ... We've had couples, pregnant women — one almost miscarried."

Milliner, who had been sleeping in the card room with her four grandchildren, was driving to Felton with the children when the earthquake hit. She had been evicted from her apartment in Pasadena and was driving to Santa Cruz with hopes of staying with her son. The earthquake forced her son out of his apartment, leaving Milliner and the four children stranded.

"She makes you feel like you're at home," said Milliner about Aikins. A birthday party for her 14-year-old grandson at the shelter brought tears to her eyes, she said. "These kids had a hard life."

Aikins plans to continue her volunteer work after the shelter closes, organizing food drives to get food out to the people in the Santa Cruz mountain areas and the San Lorenzo Valley who are sleeping outside, but don't want to leave their homes.

"We're getting people settled," said Aikins. "The Elks lodge people have been fantastic."



Photos by Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Ceola Milliner and grandson Duriel bask in the warmth.