Hospice brings dignity to dying

By Terri Morgan
Special to the Mercury News

When Shane Hall was diagnosed with AIDS, one of his biggest concerns was that he would end up in a hospital hooked up to myriad tubes and life support systems.

Instead, the 27-year-old man died quietly at his Santa Cruz home June 23, surrounded by family, friends and nurses from the Hospice Caring Project of Santa Cruz County.

"Words cannot express how good those people (from the hospice) were to Shane," said his father, Robert Hall. "They were there at his bedside 24 hours a day when he needed them. They were able to respect his wishes, and help make his passing as easy as possible.

"We were struggling to keep Shane alive, knowing all along that he was going to die. Hospice made it better for all of us at the end."

The Hospice Caring Project has been helping the terminally ill, and their survivors, in Santa Cruz County since 1978. The project's goal, according to executive director Jo Ann Siemsen, is to help keep patients at home and provide support for those confronted with dying and death.

"We're really a life-enhancing concern," Siemsen said. "We encourage the terminally ill to make the best use of the time they have left. Our reward is in seeing people live life fully, and helping them explore the meaning of their lives."

Siemsen said the project's other goal is to offer support to the patients' families.

"Sometimes the dying person is coping better than the family," she
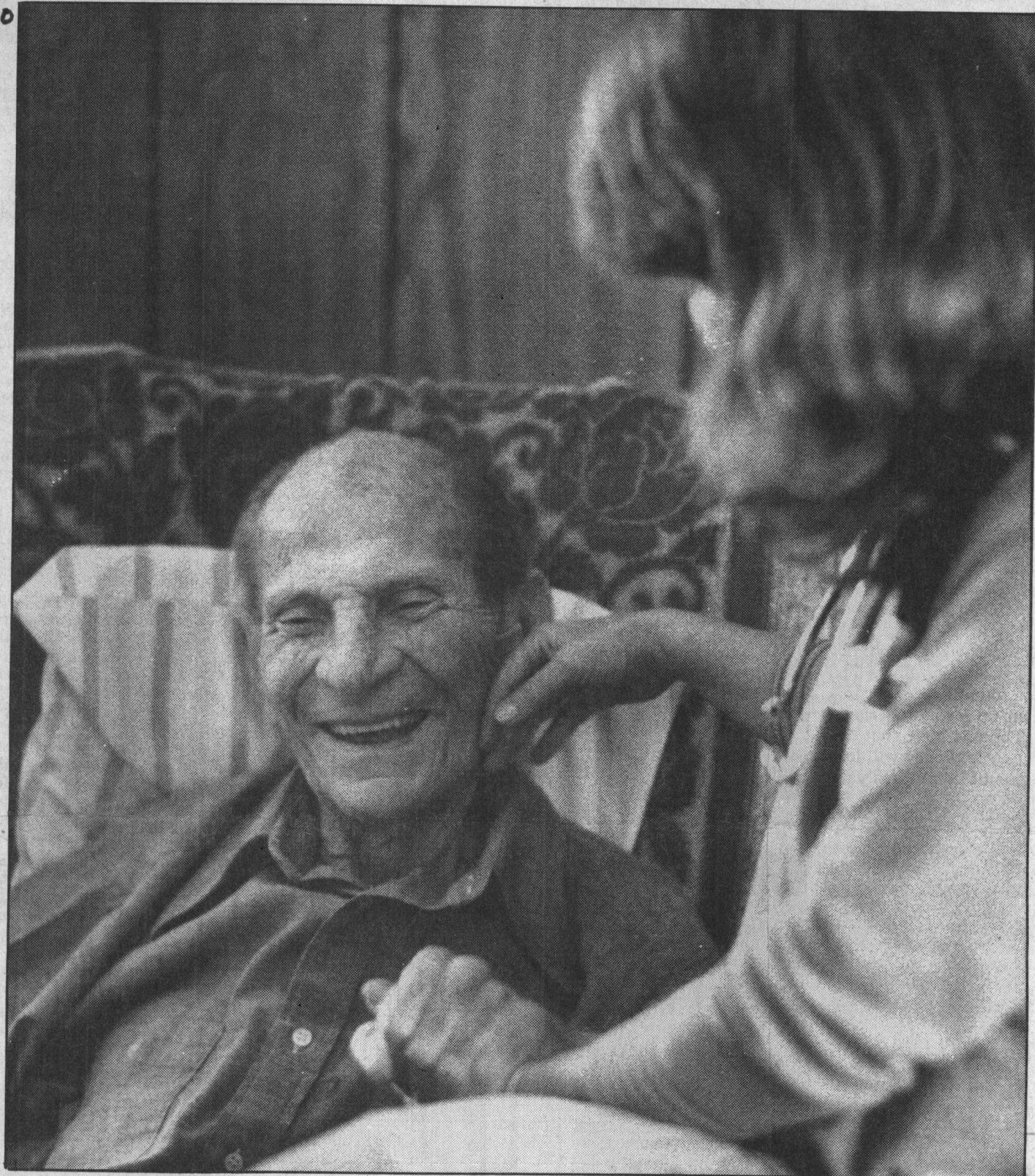
Karen T. Borchers — Mercury News

Vickie Simpson, with the Hospice Caring Project, comforts Logan Crane, 86, of Capitola

Hospice strives to enhance final days of terminally ill

said. "We don't just take care of an individual. We try to provide support to the entire family, whether it's giving them a needed break from caring for a patient 24 hours a day, or providing counseling to assist them with the grief process."

Shane's roommate, Richard Johnson, praised the organization.

"I was at my wit's end, and they came in and took over anytime I needed them," Johnson said. "What struck me the most was the dignified and professional manner in which all of the hospice workers performed. Shane's death was less of a struggle, and more of a peaceful transition."

The term "hospice" is derived from hospitality — and hospital — and means a place where one can be a guest, Siemsen said.

Hospice programs originated during the Crusades, when ill travelers were taken in and cared for by strangers.

"When modern medicine took hold, hospice programs gradually fell by the wayside," Siemsen said. "They started up again in the late '50s or early '60s" in London.

The first U.S. hospice project opened in Connecticut in 1973. Since then, hospices have opened nationwide, largely through the efforts of volunteers. Today, Siemsen said, there are 144 hospice programs in California.

The Santa Cruz County hospice project, which is operated by volunteers and paid staff members, serves about three dozen patients at any given time. Eighty percent have been diagnosed with cancer, and 10 percent with acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

Patients are not charged for hospice services. If a patient's medical insurance provides hospice benefits, however, those companies will be billed. The rest of the money to operate the project comes from grants, donations, garage sales and other fund-raisers.

"Shane had a hospice clause in his insurance, but that didn't matter," Hall said. "Hospice would have taken care of him anyway."

For more information on the Hospice Caring Project of Santa Cruz County, call (408) 688-7684.