

Famed activist poet dies

Santa Cruz luminary
fiercely advocated
for social justice

By J.M. BROWN

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SANTA CRUZ — Adrienne Rich, the internationally renowned Santa Cruz poet and essayist whose much-awarded work to fiercely advance feminism, nonviolence and gay rights inspired contemporaries and younger generations alike, died Tuesday. She was 82.

Rich died at home from complications from rheumatoid arthritis, said her son, Pablo Conrad. She had lived in Santa Cruz since the 1980s.

"She was one of the great American poets; she was totally committed to what we think about today as social justice, but radically so," said friend Bettina Aptheker, a longtime



RICH

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leading feminist figure and UC Santa Cruz professor. "She was anti-imperialist in her thinking. She had a razor-sharp mind and brilliant use of language that gave you tremendous insight into things."

In more than a dozen volumes of poetry and five collections of nonfiction, Rich tackled racism, sexuality and women's rights.

After gaining national prominence with her third poetry collection, "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," in 1963, Rich won a National Book Award for her collection of poems, "Diving into the Wreck," in 1974, and 30 years later won the National Book Critics Circle Award in Poetry for her collection "The School Among the Ruins." Her latest work, "Tonight No Poetry Will Serve," was released last year.

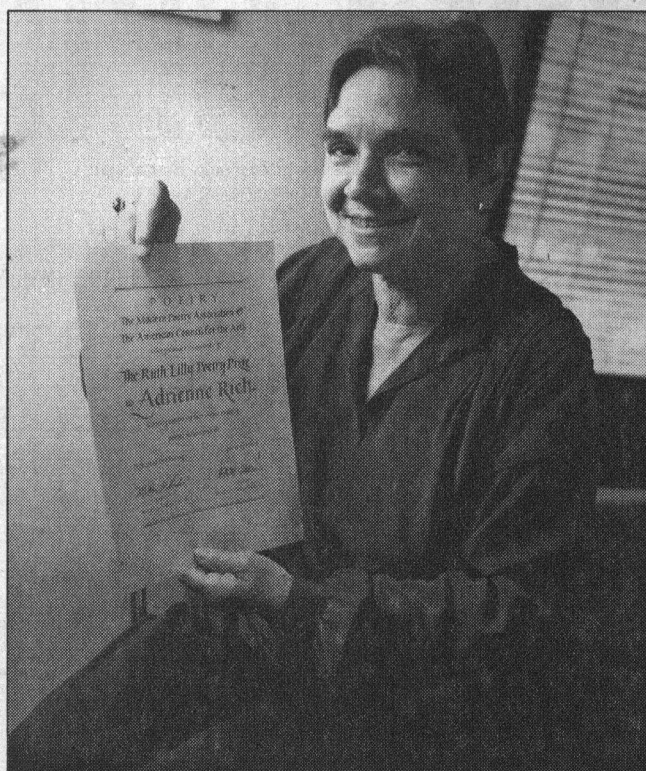
"She was a courageous poet," David Swanger, Santa Cruz County's poet laureate, said. "She was courageous in that she wrote against the current before it was fashionable to do so, to speak up as a woman and as a lesbian. She was a real pioneer."

Aptheker said Rich "used her own life early on like a laser beam to talk about issues for women and gay and lesbian people."

A CHANGE IN PATH

Rich, who taught at many colleges and universities, including Brandeis, Cornell, San Jose State and Stanford, drew on her experiences as a mother to write "Of Woman Born," her groundbreaking feminist critique of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood, published in 1976. She and her husband, Harvard economist Alfred Haskell Conrad, had three sons before she left him and came out as a lesbian, living for more than 35 years with her partner, writer Michelle Cliff.

Born in Baltimore in 1929, Rich was the elder of two daughters of a Jewish father and a Protestant mother, a mixed heritage she explored in her autobiographical poem "Sources." Her father, a doc-



CHARLES KNOBLOCK/AP FILE

Poet Adrienne Rich holds her certificate announcing the \$25,000 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize in Chicago in 1986. Rich, whose socially conscious verse influenced a generation of feminist, gay-rights and anti-war activists, died Tuesday in Santa Cruz, where she had lived since the 1980s.

tor and medical professor at Johns Hopkins University, encouraged her to write poetry at an early age.

Rich graduated from Radcliffe College in 1951 and was chosen for the Yale Younger Poets Prize for her first book of poetry, "A Change of World." She went on to win a MacArthur "genius" fellowship, two Guggenheim Fellowships and many top literary awards including the Bollingen Prize, Brandeis Creative Arts Medal, Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize and the Wallace Stevens Award.

But when President Bill Clinton awarded the National Medal of Arts in 1997, Rich refused it, citing the administration's "cynical politics." She believed art and politics should not be separate and considered herself a socialist.

"The radical disparities of wealth and power in America are widening at a devastating rate," she wrote to the administration. "A president cannot meaningfully honor certain token artists while the people at large are so dishonored."

Friend Dennis Morton, longtime host of KUSP's "The Poetry Show," said, "She had no hesitation whatsoever in writ-

ing about politics. A lot of poets are of the attitude that politics and poetry just don't mix, but Adrienne never felt that way."

Swanger said Rich's life was devoted to her art.

"She was a quiet, steady presence in the community and she was without vanity," he said. "It's a great loss."

SANTA CRUZ ICON

Even as she enjoyed fame as a pre-eminent poet, Rich never failed to be a Santa Cruzan, appearing at a landmark downtown bookstore for standing-room-only readings whenever her new work was published. She maintained relationships with many in the local arts scene.

"She was an incredible friend not only to Bookshop Santa Cruz but to all independent bookstores," said owner Casey Coonerty. "At many of our events she so eloquently made the case for local bookstores bringing people together. She meant more to us than I can say."

Before Coonerty took over the shop from her father, county Supervisor Neal Coonerty, she remembers escorting Rich to readings, getting

BIOGRAPHY

ADRIENNE RICH

BORN: May 16, 1929

DIED: March 27, 2012

RESIDENCE: Santa Cruz

OCCUPATION: Award-winning feminist poet and essayist who wrote more than a dozen volumes of poetry, including "Diving into the Wreck" and "Snapshots of a Daughter in Law," and five nonfiction collections.

ACHIEVEMENTS: Yale Younger Poets Prize, MacArthur 'genius' fellowship, two Guggenheim Fellowships, Bollingen Prize, Brandeis Creative Arts Medal, Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize and Wallace Stevens Award, among others.

SURVIVORS: Partner Michelle Cliff; sons David, Pablo and Jacob Conrad; sister Cynthia Rich; two grandchildren.

MEMORIAL: No information available.

the chance to chat in the car along the way. The shop has set up a table containing flowers, Rich's poetry, and a book for fans and friends to leave notes of remembrance.

"It felt like she was part of the store," Coonerty said. "Her spirit will be part of the store forever."

Admirers said Rich's work contained a spirit all its own.

"Her connection to Judaism was cultural and political," said Rabbi Paula Marcus of the Temple Beth El in Aptos, where Rich would come to worship occasionally. "She did have a deep spiritual side. And she was always warm and friendly. She had about her a gentleness as well as a strength that came from her convictions."

In addition to Cliff and son Pablo, Rich is survived by sons David and Jacob, sister Cynthia Rich and two grandchildren. There was no information Wednesday about possible memorial plans.

Sentinel staff writer Wallace Baine and the Associated Press contributed to this report.

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