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Noren didn't shun controversy

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Retiring sheriff not reluctant to speak his mind

By LANE WALLACE
STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ County Sheriff Al Noren has never been accused of being politically correct, and that's fine with him.

Noren, 57, who retires next month after 20 years in office, doesn't hesitate to say what he believes, even if it doesn't satisfy his audience.

"I probably lack a lot of tact and diplomacy, but when somebody calls me a Nazi, why

'I probably lack a lot of tact and diplomacy, but when somebody calls me a Nazi, why should I be courteous?'

should I be courteous?" Noren said, referring to catcalls from the audience during a debate over marijuana enforcement last year.

The conservative Noren has

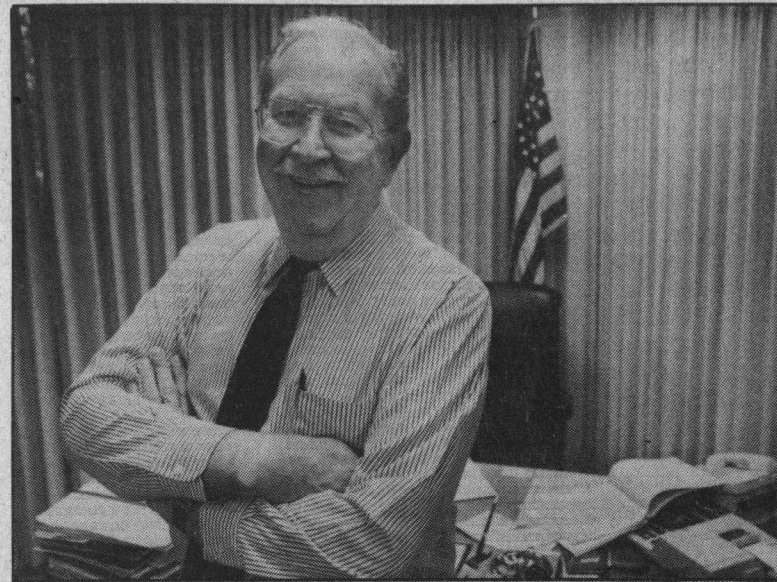
occasionally riled Santa Cruz liberals with his remarks, and he's tangled with county supervisors a few times, most notably in the late '70s over the new jail and a special weapons and tacti-

cal team (SWAT), and the marijuana issue last year.

He's argued with liberal Supervisor Gary Patton a number of times (see accompanying story, page 3), and has criticized District Attorney Art Danner.

"I'm willing to say I can't get along with Arthur Danner," said Noren, adding that he doesn't believe Danner's office is tough enough in prosecuting some crimes.

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Mike McCollum

Retiring Sheriff Al Noren always spoke his mind.

NOREN

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Noren "typically doesn't bend to the political winds," said Chief Deputy Jim Bonar, who has worked for the Sheriff's Office for 26 years. "He tends to speak his mind clearly."

While he doesn't shy away from controversy, Noren is more interested in the quality of law enforcement than politics.

"He's very ethical. He demands high standards," Bonar said, adding that Noren doesn't hesitate to mete out discipline when it's warranted.

His fairness "gives employees a sense of security," said Deanna Musler, Noren's secretary.

The Sheriff's Office has computers, but Noren said he hasn't gone in for the technological "gimmickry" of some other law enforcement agencies.

If you want to leave a message for a sheriff's employee, it won't be by voice mail or answering machine. Noren doesn't allow them at the office, and he doesn't have one at home.

"If I call my son-in-law in Arizona, I get a message telling me they're not home. I would have known that anyway if they didn't answer," Noren said.

When he started as a deputy in 1960, law enforcement "was a totally different ball game," Noren said. "You were kind of self-taught" without as much training as officers get now.

In 1974, Noren, then a lieutenant, defeated incumbent Sheriff Doug James, who was seeking a fifth term.

"I'd never had thoughts of running," Noren said, until Assistant

Arch-rival Patton admires Noren's competence

When debates about law enforcement have turned philosophical, Santa Cruz County Supervisor Gary Patton and Al Noren have invariably been on opposite sides over the last 20 years.

They disagreed on the size of a new jail, on formation of a special weapons and tactical team, and on how helicopters were used for marijuana enforcement.

The ultra-liberal Patton favors

alternatives to jail, such as rehabilitation programs, while the conservative Noren believes there's too much rehabilitation and not enough punishment.

The two have been blunt with each other. "Gary doesn't think highly of law enforcement," said Noren.

But the two also profess a respect for each other. "I have to admire him," for sticking to his principles, Noren said.

While disagreeing with Noren on philosophy, Patton said he admires the way Noren has run the office.

On issues of the "bad cop" — and Patton said there have been few — Noren "has been willing to work out the problem" and doesn't automatically support his employee, Patton said.

Dealing with such issues "is a terribly tough job," Patton said.

— Lane Wallace

Sheriff Lee Davis questioned his integrity. After a \$100 bill turned up missing during a drug raid, Noren said Davis told him he couldn't run the narcotics enforcement team that had just been set up.

Noren and several other deputies professed their innocence and voluntarily took lie-detector tests, which they passed.

When James backed Davis in keeping Noren off the narcotics team, Noren said he got ticked off enough to run. "I'd been honest. I'd had a pretty good record" in the Sheriff's Office, Noren said.

Noren took office in early 1975 and soon fired Davis. Noren never faced strong opposition in his reelection campaigns.

Noren has long advocated stiffer penalties for crimes, saying they can deter repeat offenses. And while he's a believer in punishment rather than rehabilitation, Noren speaks with pride about the classes and training programs offered at the minimum security jail farm off Harkins Slough Road.

"I have no thoughts that I'm going to force people" to change,

Noren said, adding that he's happy to provide the opportunity for those who want it.

Those who run afoul of the law have themselves to blame, said Noren.

"People ought to be held accountable," said Noren, who calls "hogwash" the theories of social scientists "who tend to blame everything on someone else or the environment."

But don't let Noren's sometimes-crusty veneer fool you. There's a compassionate man behind it, said Musler, who has been Noren's secretary since he took

office.

"He has a real feeling about anybody who suffers," Musler said. "It's a side people don't often see," she said, recalling how Noren once sat in his office thinking about the trauma a murder victim's family went through.

Noren said he doesn't have any definite plans for retirement. He and his wife, Judy, who live in Live Oak, have five children and six grandchildren.

Noren enjoys wood carving, and said retirement will allow him to "see if I can get good at it."