

# Homeless oust advocate

## Free Meal program bars Robert Norse

By GREG BEEBE  
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Organizers of A Free Meal, the food-service program for the homeless, have voted to ban Robert Norse, the controversial advocate for homeless rights, from attending nightly feedings at the program's meal site behind the River Street Shelter.

Karen Gillette, director of A Free Meal, said that workers and recipients at the meal voted on Sunday to ask Norse, 42, not to attend the meals.

"They voted yesterday that Robert is no longer welcome at the meal site, since he's not homeless and he doesn't eat there and he doesn't work there," Gillette said.

Norse, whose sometimes confrontational tactics have angered city officials, community leaders and homeless alike, was asked to leave the meal site four days in a row after Gillette and workers there accused him of violating the conditions of the program's lease agreement and funding, which stipulate that no political, religious or illegal activities be promoted there.

"Most of the people don't want him around here," said Mike "Moonrise" Carreiro, a homeless man who does volunteer work for A Free Meal. "We took a vote and 95 percent of the people voted him out."

"This place is like a sanctuary," said David, another homeless worker at A Free Meal. "We don't want politics involved. There's enough of that already."

Mike Wilson, a homeless activist who came to Santa Cruz after pushing a shopping cart up the coast from Santa Barbara to bring attention to the plight of the homeless, said Norse was "86'd for being a disruptive influence. The general mood around here is that Robert Norse doesn't really care how it goes for the homeless as long as they spell his name right in the paper," Wilson said.

Norse recently started a new organization, J.U.S.T. (Join Us: Sleep Tonight) to protest enforcement of the city's camping ordinance, which makes sleeping outdoors between the hours of 11 p.m. and 8:30 a.m. against the law. Gillette and others from A Free Meal said Norse was using the food giveaways to drum up support for some suspected sleep-in protests in the field behind the meal site, which a group called the Coalition for a Safe Place to Sleep is proposing for use as an emergency campground for the homeless.

"When J.U.S.T. became an organization, an official group that advocated several different kinds of civil disobedience, the entire group thought that was inappropriate at the meal," Gillette said.

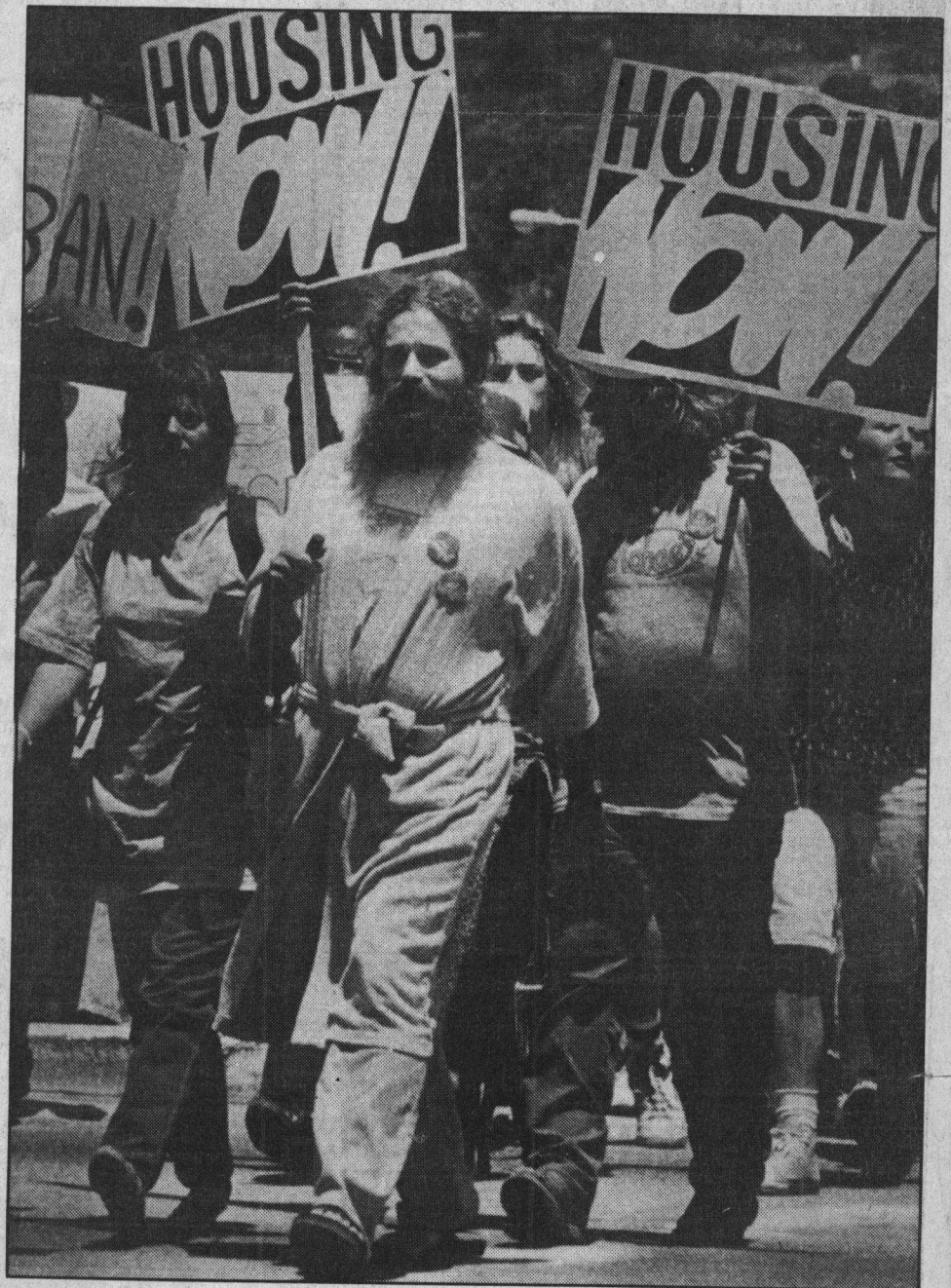
"They thought it would irritate the River Street Shelter (management) and jeopardize the efforts for a campground," she said.

Norse, who said his "feelings are hurt" because of the vote, said J.U.S.T.'s purpose is to "mobilize homeless sentiment. There is some concern among homeless people that at the Sept. 11 City Council meeting there will be no action (on the temporary campground proposal) and that sleeping will continue to be a crime."

"The homeless meal," Norse said, "is a very successful operation which stemmed from extensive demonstrations and civil disobedience in 1989, but if you talk to Karen (Gillette) now, she'll tell you that it all happened because of her negotiations with the county."

"She says she has a lease that is imperiled by leafletting and political actions there ... My understanding leads me to believe that is not the case," Norse said.

"Karen and some sincere activists



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel file

Robert Norse leads marchers during the Fourth of July protest.

working with her believe that I am organizing some sort of sleep-in at the shelter site, that I'm advocating some sort of civil disobedience," Norse said. "There have been many conversations there, and the issue has never come up. She wants to assert a form of power in the situation that I think is arbitrary and a danger to the free speech rights of the homeless."

Gillette said, "There is a strong desire among the homeless to speak for themselves and to be responsible for their own image. To the people in the meal program, the issue is not what the homeless do politically, the question is what happens at the meal site."

The vote by the Free Meal staff and recipients signals the second such estrangement of Norse from the homeless community. The Coalition for a Safe Place to Sleep voted recently to ask Norse not to attend its meetings.

"The coalition has barred me as well," Norse said. "I call it a form of blacklisting."

Sherry Conable, founder and spokeswoman for the coalition, cited three reasons behind the decision to exclude Norse from the group's meetings.

"Number one, we don't trust what Robert would do with the information he would hear in the meetings. Two, he may try to sabotage the possibility that the campground might go forward, and three, we feel that his tactics make it less likely that homeless people will get what they need and more likely that they will be mistreated," Conable said.

"He consistently uses tactics that make it less likely that homeless people will be treated with the respect and dig-

nity they deserve," she said.

"It truly upsets me that Norse treats the very people he purports to represent

with such disrespect and abuse ... And it perplexes me, indeed, that he invokes the spirits of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., for he does not seem to understand or reflect the quality of their work at all," Conable said.

"There are people out there who have always been allergic to any kind of talk about confrontations and demonstrations," Norse said. "I'm not disrupting meetings. It's a conflict of, a combination of personality, power and politics. ... Sherry and others feel that I'm such a disreputable radical that it would doom their proposal."

Both the Coalition for a Safe Place to Sleep and A Free Meal have hinted that police could be called if Norse continued to appear uninvited. "When I attempt to speak quietly on my own the police are about to be called," Norse said. "The question is there an agenda underneath for some, quote, progressive liberals, to take and domesticate the homeless movement in Santa Cruz to be sure of winning the November election?" Norse said.

Conable said it's "time for the community to stop hiding behind the spectre of Robert Norse as an excuse for not meeting the legitimate needs of homeless people."

"The coalition has provided effective alternative leadership and we've come up with a very credible proposal and now its really time for elected officials to take note of that by moving forward in a positive way," Conable said.