

Justice on the street

HOMELESS

Robert Norse: Homeless champion, or champion showman?

By GREG BEEBE
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SANTA CRUZ — When homeless-rights advocate Robert Norse arrived in Santa Cruz in 1977, he was "just outraged" at the city's camping ban.

"That gives police a blank check to go after classes of people they don't like — hippies, gypsies, street people, poor people," Norse said. "It riles me and that's why I got so actively involved in this issue."

Norse, whose real name is Robert Norse Kahn, describes himself as "one person who doesn't like what he sees, and talks about it."

To some, Norse is a champion of rights for the homeless, but to his detractors — who are often turned off by his sometimes-aggressive and confrontational tactics — he is a stumbling block to improved dialogue between the authorities and home-

less activists.

Norse has been at the forefront of such protest actions as commandeering the Civic Auditorium kitchen, disrupting City Council meetings and giving away soup at the Town Clock.

He is also prints the Street Sheet, the editorial voice of the homeless and street people. In it, Norse's writing takes an almost comical look at the continuing exploits of homeless, activists and the police.

Jane Imler, who has often joined the protest lines with Norse, said, "A lot of things have been done behind the scenes by Robert. And there has been a lot of anti-Robert sentiment on the part of city officials, some homeless and some activists. Whether it's justified or not, I don't know," Imler said.

"When I met him about two years ago, it didn't seem as if he was as concerned about the homeless themselves as about the violation of their rights."

"I like to see people asserting their rights," said Norse. "One of those rights is to not be harassed."

Norse doesn't pretend to speak for the homeless. "I'm not homeless, how can I be a spokesman for the homeless?" he asked. He rents a room in a house on the city's east side, and lives off "a trust fund and savings." Norse, 42, has worked as a warehouseman, child-care provider and teacher of disabled children, he said, but currently devotes his time to the cause.

"I don't mean to be sounding like a cheerleader for Robert," said Imler, "but he could be sitting in a bar or playing golf or tennis all day, and instead he's taken on this cause."

"He's very direct with people and he doesn't take any of their bull," Imler said. "He jumps in right away, and because of that he becomes seen as much more confrontational."

Too confrontational in the eyes of such city leaders

as Councilman John Laird. "I believe a successful organizer is someone who has a clear agenda and tries to use the public show as a method of achieving that agenda."

"I think he has a public show but I don't think he has an agenda," Laird said.

"You have to consider," Norse said, "that daily the Police Department is enforcing a policy that substitutes naked brute force for any kind of common sense and human consideration."

"When you attempt to deal with a social problem by using the police force you create confrontations. The (camping ban) policy itself is confrontational," Norse said. "What else happens when a policeman rousts someone at midnight and then charges them \$69 for the favor?"