



Franich with his trademark hat.

Tony Franich dead at 83

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WATSONVILLE — It's not often that people express surprise at the death of an 83-year-old man.

But when longtime Watsonville attorney Tony Franich died over the weekend, friends and acquaintances said it was strange to imagine Watsonville without him.

Best known for his fist-pounding, 13-year fight to get one of the most controversial land annexations in Santa Cruz County history, Franich was a local fixture who seemed timeless to many. And certainly not 83.

Just two weeks ago, Franich was representing clients in court. He drove himself to the Greek Festival in San Jose. He still attended public hearings in his signature herringbone hat. During the past five years he was teaching himself to play an electric keyboard, and he fancied learning computers so he could cruise the Internet.

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Franich became sick a little more than a week ago and died Saturday of staph infection in Dominican Hospital in Santa Cruz.

Many who knew him best said it was the annexation into Watsonville of 72 acres of property off East Lake Avenue that kept him going.

"It was a consuming ambition," said Tim Morgan, Franich's attorney and personal friend. "It certainly kept him engaged and challenged in a way nothing else did."

And Franich could not mention his 13-year annexation bid without naming the man he held responsible for his long and costly wait, Gary Patton. Though Franich often used unprintable terms to describe those who didn't agree with him, the former Santa Cruz County supervisor, held a special place in Franich's heart.

"After 13 years, I can now do some of the things Gary Patton has prevented me from doing — enjoying life, taking a trip, maybe even getting a hairpiece," Franich told the Watsonville City Council after his annexation bid was approved by a county commission in December 1994.

Until his death, Franich was heading the family's plans on developing the property, which will include market-rate and low-income homes, a city park and an elementary school.

Franich blamed Patton for a lawsuit which led to the overturn of

the original 1981 annexation approval. Franich would pay more than \$150,000 for an extensive environmental plan, attend dozens of meetings, and lobby state legislators in a failed attempt to get a bill passed allowing him to develop his property.

Patton, now working as a Sacramento lobbyist, remembers the exchanges well.

"He was an attorney, above all else, and I think he tried making an argument ... as a crusty, cantankerous guy against the young upstarts ... he felt that was a good way to present himself. He made this presentation by personally attacking me ... to get what he wanted, and that's to build houses on that agricultural land," and make "millions and millions" for his family, Patton said.

Patton said he admired Franich for his drama and "spice in life." Over the years he said he wondered if Franich hadn't had the same dramatic law professor at Stanford, who was very old when Patton was a student.

"He had this style of dramatizing the aagony, the absuurdity of the way things were," Patton said, mimicking Franich's speech. "How could anyone, Mr. Patton, say that? You know you're wrong, Mr. Patton." Going to law school injured me to that, so I never took it personally with Mr. Franich."

But those who knew Franich well said Patton was more than a political nemesis.

"That was no pretention," said Morgan on Monday. "(Franich) could be dramatic, but he was heartfelt and sincere in his criticism of Gary Patton. He was made

truly happy by the thought he beat Gary, saw the annexation done, and saw Gary retire from public life. I told him he should thank him (Patton) — he prolonged his life by at least 10 years."

Franich reveled in getting his last licks in by planning a barbecue in November for 300 of his closest friends and those who had supported his annexation bid. Franich's roast of Patton was long-planned and central to the event.

But Watsonville Mayor Tony Campos said Franich was misunderstood by the general public.

"People thought he was kind of a crotchety old guy, but deep down he was a level-headed guy, a fair person, and a pretty intelligent man. People didn't see that because of his mannerisms," Campos said.

Still, Franich left many he fought over the years who could only say on Monday that they "couldn't think of anything nice to say." Many criticized him for what they called his attempt to use his money and power to do an end-run around the democratic process and appeal to lawmakers in Sacramento. Campos offered another angle.

"He took this on by himself as a crusade for government to treat the average guy right," Campos said, but admitted Franich wasn't the "average guy."

Friends say Franich's resolve is largely due to his humble beginnings as the child of John and Lucy Franich, who emigrated from Croatia to California and grew apples in the Pajaro Valley.

Close friend and former Watsonville City Manager John Radin said Franich could have had a brilliant career as a criminal law-

yer but decided to do general law and stay close to his family. Franich was described as being close to his three grown children and his wife, Bess, though he has lived by himself in his family's East Lake Avenue home for the past 25 years.

"I don't believe living with someone was ever a thing he found comfortable," said his wife, who described him as "so emphatic and assertive in having his way."

A Watsonville High School graduate, Franich was fond of telling people he graduated summa cum laude from Stanford University in 1933 and was elected to the Phi Beta Kappa honor society. He graduated from the university's law school in 1936. Franich began practicing law with Santa Cruz attorney Stanford Smith, before opening his own practice on East Lake Avenue in Watsonville.

Franich's law career was disrupted while he served in France and Germany as a U.S. Army officer during World War II. After returning to Santa Cruz County, he worked as a veteran service officer in Santa Cruz. There he met his wife, who was seeking advice after her first husband died in the war.

Franich was a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and of

the American Legion. He also belonged to many service clubs, including the Watsonville Elks Lodge, the Knights of Columbus, the Over-65 Club, and the Santa Cruz County and California bar associations. While Franich was president of the county bar association in the 1960s, the Legal Aid Society was formed.

Over the years, Franich quietly donated generous sums to community causes like the annual real estate agents' canned food drive, Campos said.

Besides his wife, he is survived by a son, John A. Franich of Scotts Valley; two daughters Marcia L. Franich of San Jose and Diane Franich Carroll of Aptos; a sister, Pauline Franich Colberg of Stockton; two grandsons; and several cousins.

A brother, Martin Franich, died in 1974.

Friends may call from 1 to 9 p.m. today tuesat Mehl's Colonial Chapel, 222 E. Lake Ave. in Watsonville. A Mass of Christian burial will be held at 10:30 a.m. Wednesday at Valley Catholic Church, 2401 E. Lake Ave., Watsonville. Entombment will follow in the family vault at Valley Catholic Cemetery in Watsonville.