



BILL LOVEJOY/SENTINEL

Gary Patton, a longtime political ally of Mardi Wormhoudt, at her memorial service Saturday at UCSC.

Wormhoudt remembered as advocate for humanity

Former mayor, county supervisor charted her own course with style

By J.M. BROWN

jbrown@santacruzsentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ — Friends and loved ones of Mardi Wormhoudt remembered the former mayor and county supervisor Saturday as an unapologetic soldier for social justice whose passion for uplifting the poor, promoting equal rights and protecting the environment was matched only by an abiding affection for her family and dedication to the city



WORMHOUDT

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she helped rebuild.

During a 90-minute memorial service at UC Santa Cruz's Stevenson Event Center, ardent admirers and one-time political foes alike feted Wormhoudt, who died Oct. 21 at age 72, for decades of tenacious, hands-on work to improve social services, safeguard open space on the North Coast and keep university growth in check. As "the face of Santa Cruz" after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, she is credited with helping the disaster-rocked city find its footing once more.

Wormhoudt was roundly described as a woman you didn't want to cross if you didn't have your facts straight — or if she just plain didn't agree with you. Recalling the piercing stare she reserved for opponents, friends said the always sharply dressed Wormhoudt didn't care what people thought of her as long as she was doing what she felt was right, whether it was standing up for gay rights, raising the profile of women in local politics, fighting for water conservation or advocating for the homeless.

"Mardi's light burned brightly with a passion for her ideals and an articulation for what she was fighting for," said longtime friend John Laird, a former state legislator who served with Wormhoudt on the City Council. "She was a woman of great style and class, the best of friends with an outrageous sense of humor and a leader who made an incredible difference."

Despite her many obligations in local government and involvement in civic affairs even after leaving public life two years ago, Wormhoudt — a mother of four and grandmother of four — managed always to make her family the top priority. From the Bay View School Site Council to the Downtown Neighbors Association, Worm-



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A photo of Mardi Wormhoudt was part of a slide show at her memorial Saturday.

houdt used her growing influence in the community to win election to the City Council in 1981 and join the county Board of Supervisors in 1995.

"No matter how busy she was, she would be home at dinner time," Laird said.

Although characterized as a political "icon," Ted Benhari of the Rural Bonny Doon Association recalled how Wormhoudt stood outside a meeting

hall one night with headlights and angry residents glaring down on her. The lights had gone out in the building, where Wormhoudt was explaining a mix-up about controversial plans for a dump site, and "although she could have easily fled home to Santa Cruz," Benhari said she "faced the agitated crowd outside."

Benhari applauded Wormhoudt's work to limit UCSC expansion, calling her the "key strategist" behind a lawsuit against the campus' Long Range Development Plan. They won concessions on student growth and water use at the campus where Wormhoudt also taught a Community Studies course. "Are there more Mardis waiting in the wing?" Benhari asked. "I hope so, because her passing has left a huge hole."

Susan Green, a founder of Gemma, a residential program for women coming out of incarceration, called Wormhoudt a trailblazer who "lived her feminism, breaking through the glass ceiling over and over. Mardi led this community with wisdom, humanity and grace."

After the memorial, Wormhoudt's sister, Mary McDevitt of Mill Valley, said, "It was wonderful to hear from people who knew her well and understood her." McDevitt said Wormhoudt inherited her directness and determination from their mother, Mary Jane Rolfs, who insisted on marrying passionate political beliefs with bold action, whereas their father, Daniel, was more proper, patient and intellectual.

McDevitt said her sister faced melanoma with the same kind of doggedness, learning what she could about the disease and charting her final course, choosing not to undergo a painful treatment and instead peacefully accept her illness.

"People die as they lived, and she died as she lived," McDevitt said of her sister's strong spirit. "She certainly had a lot of love."