

# Local

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## Homeless Squatters occupy city-owned building

### Officers roust activist band in Heiner House

By GREG BEEBE  
Sentinel staff writer

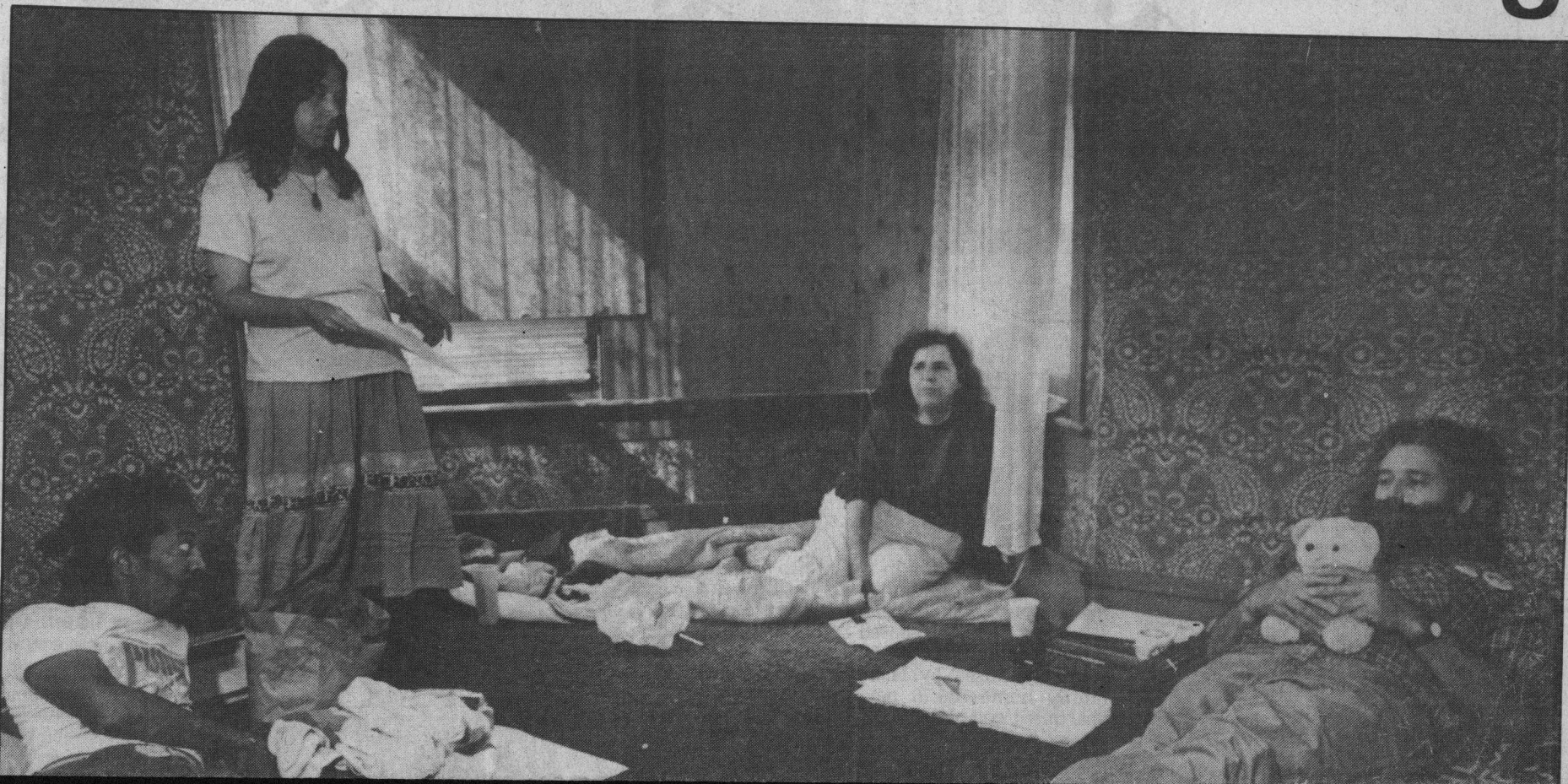
SANTA CRUZ — Police roused a rag-tag band of homeless activists Tuesday who had barricaded themselves in a boarded-up city building, and had vowed to stay there until its owners agreed to provide better housing opportunities for poor women and children.

Santa Cruz police and park rangers moved in around 4 p.m. Tuesday afternoon. They chased off activists from Bag Ladies Revolt who had taken up residence Monday night in the former Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Department administration building at 346 Church St., on the corner of Chestnut Street.

One activist, Linda Lemaster, 43, was cited and released after she refused to leave. Two others, Jane Imler and Robert Flory, left without incident.

The two-story, 115-year-old building, also known as the Heiner House, has been closed and red-tagged since suffering structural damage in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

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The Community Housing Corp., non-profit developers of low-income and affordable housing, purchased the rights to the Victorian home last year for \$1. CHC plans to relocate and restore it as "very low-income" housing on a piece of land it owns two blocks away on Chestnut Street. In the meantime, the city still technically owns the building.

But the Bag Ladies commandeered the house around 7:30 Monday night. Nine protesters — some homeless, some not — bedded down in the former office of city Parks and Recreation Director Jim Lang. The activists used a picnic table and an overturned desk to block easy access to the impromptu bedroom.

Lang filed a trespassing complaint with city police Tuesday afternoon.

"The building has been posted as a hazardous building and they can't occupy it," said Lang. The city also was concerned about vandalism and the risk of fire there, he said.

"We thought that they would make their statement, spend some time in the building and then take their stuff and leave," said Lang. "But then it became obvious to us that there appeared to be a greater effort toward making a splash in the newspapers rather than providing housing for homeless people."

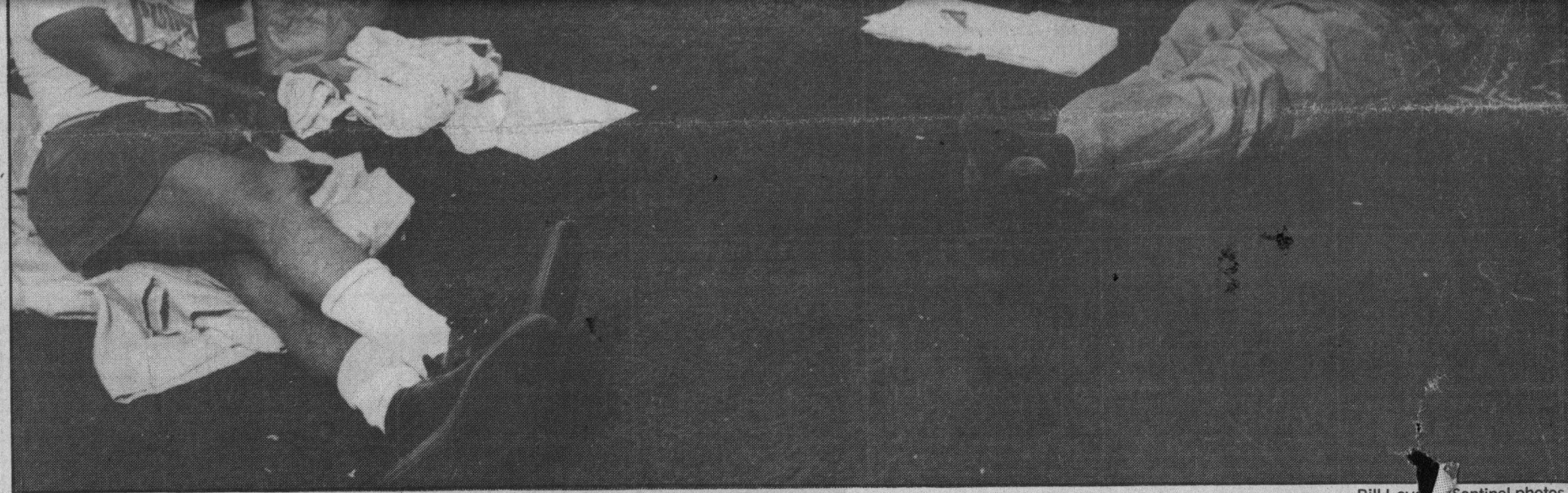
In choosing to squat in the building, the activists broke ranks with the Santa Cruz Union of the Homeless, which voted Monday night not to occupy the Heiner House, settling instead for action on July 14 or 15 at state land at Josephine and River streets near the San Lorenzo River. Other sites considered were Harvey West Park and a piece of land near Holy Cross Mission above Scribner Park, spokesman Anders Corr said.

The union, which has about a dozen members, formed about a month ago to pursue non-violent occupations of vacant land and abandoned buildings as part of a homeless advocacy agenda.

The renegade Heiner House occupation was intended to bring public attention to the "abuse and neglect of homeless people" in the county, said a flier posted on the building's front door. The activists wanted the city and CHC to turn over the home for use as temporary housing for low-income mothers and their children.

"We've been concerned about this piece of property for many, many months," said Imler, who spent a rainy but dry night in the building with fellow activists Lemaster, Linda Edwards, Robert Norse, Flory, Tonee Mello and John Hamilton, among others. The male members of the revolt have dubbed themselves the Bag Boys Auxiliary. Norse was not there when police arrived; Imler said he was away buying "bongo burgers."

Imler charged that CHC worked out a "sweetheart"



Bill Love/Sentinel photos

Above, homeless people and advocates occupy the old Parks and Recreation office; below, Mike Williams reads in front of the building.

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deal with the city "under the table and through the turnstiles." The deal is especially inappropriate, she said, since drastic state budget cuts in welfare and health services loom and "a lot of people are going to wind up on the streets."

Arnie Fischman, executive director of CHC, defended the agreement with the city and said the building was "heavily damaged" in the '89 quake and "very dangerous" to inhabit.

"Our engineers are only allowed in there with special precautions and I understand it's very hazardous for anyone to be in that building," he said.

The revolt was patterned after similar "direct actions" in the San Francisco Bay Area in which activists from Dignity Housing West have risked arrest to commandeer vacant buildings. Those activists say non-violent building occupations have resulted in the creation of hundreds of new housing opportunities for homeless people.

Norse, whose often-confrontational protest tactics have angered city officials as well as more traditional advocates for the homeless, said he hoped "these kinds of actions may press the city into action."

Norse said the Bag Ladies had been attending weekly meetings of the Santa Cruz Union of the Homeless, but grew frustrated at what he said was the group's perceived shift toward "talk-show" activism.

"They're doing the talking and we're doing the acting," said Norse, clutching a teddy bear.

The Bag Ladies, said Fischman, violated a clear union consensus not to occupy the Heiner House.

"They pretend to be speaking for the homeless yet they don't let the homeless speak for themselves," he said.

Although the homeless union didn't endorse the Bag Ladies' action, spokesman Corr said "as an individual, I definitely support the occupation of housing."

