

A legacy of leadership: Ray Belgard dies at 76

Friends remember former police chief as public servant with integrity, approachability

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REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

Ray Belgard, a former Watsonville police chief and Santa Cruz County supervisor, admired as much for his investigative and leadership abilities as for his genial nature, died Friday of pneumonia.

Belgard, 76, originally from Bonita, La., moved to the area in 1939, said his daughter Judy Belgard Akimoto.

After serving for about five years in the Salinas Police Department in the 1950s, he became an investigator for the Monterey County District Attorney's office. He later served as chief investigator in the Santa Cruz County District Attorney's Office, where he was instrumental in leading investigations of three grisly murders that gripped the county in the

1970s.

Akimoto remembered her father admonishing her, "Don't ever hitchhike!" after several female hitchhikers were killed.

She joked that she started driving her own car at 15 because of her father's warnings.

"He was very well known, a big player, so to speak, but you'd never think it just to talk to him," she said. "He was busy a lot, but he always had time for all of us. He was pretty cool as dads go."

Belgard moved from the district attorney's office to an eight-year stint as Watsonville's chief of police, followed by two terms on the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors. After that, he retired — "kind of," his daughter said.

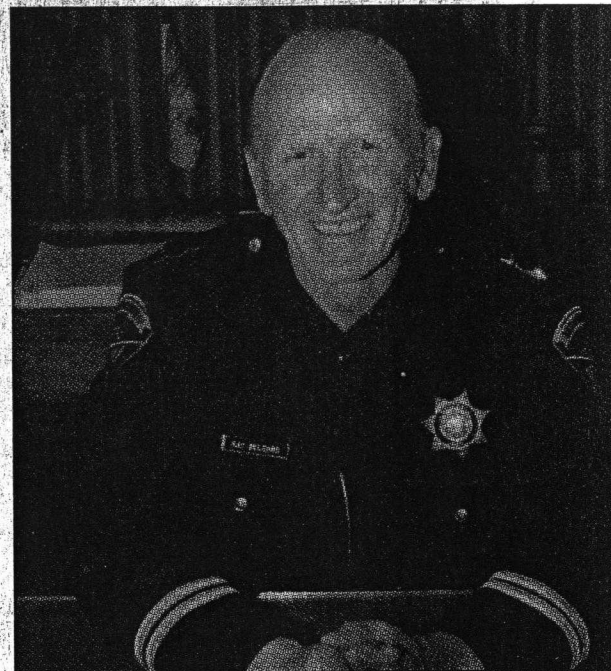
He continued his involvement in the community by serving on the boards of directors of the Pajaro

Valley Cemetery District and the Independence Square senior community, and on the Central Republican Committee.

Belgard's wife, Jeri, died in 2005 after the couple had been married for 51 years. Akimoto said she moved in with her father after her mother's death to "make sure he ate," but said her father never slowed down. He stayed busy with local politics, golf and committee work.

"He had his fingers in a lot of pots," Akimoto said.

Longtime family friend Lorraine Stucki described Belgard as an easygoing man who loved football, fishing, friendship and his dog Baxter. He had a quick wit, "the utmost integrity," and a knack for making everything from a get together over



Ray Belgard is shown during his tenure as Watsonville police chief in the 1980s.

Courtesy of the Belgard family

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a pot of spaghetti to his extensive public service seem effortless and welcoming.

"He was comfortable in his position as supervisor; he was also comfortable in a pair of boots out on the lake or by some stream. I never heard him complain, never heard him lose his temper. This was a man who got a lot accomplished and was still able to make it look like, 'Hey, we're just kicking back over here,'" Stucki said.

Akimoto described her father as an outgoing, friendly person who befriended everyone he met.

"He never met a stranger, never met anybody he didn't like," she said. "He always had a huge smile on his face. He didn't put on airs for anybody."

Friends and acquaintances shared similar impressions Friday, describing a man who was both admirable and utterly unpretentious.

"Supervisor Belgard was an honorable and dignified man," state senator Abel Maldonado, a fellow Republican, said in a promptly issued press release. "He always served with integrity and put the needs of people before politics."

"Ray devoted his life to the service of Santa Cruz and Monterey counties," said Bill Johnston, a personal friend who worked with Belgard when he was supervisor, and more recently on the Independence Square board. "He did an outstanding job as supervisor, chief of police, and was dedicated to serving the community. He will certainly be missed."

"He had a vast experience and a vast knowledge," said County Supervisor Tony Campos, who periodically met with Belgard and mutual friend John Radden for lunch. "He was well-respected and well-liked."

Campos, a Democrat, credits Belgard with talking him into running for the supervisor seat, which Campos has held since Belgard stepped down.

Betty Bobeda, who served with Belgard on the Independence Square board, held him in similar regard.

"He was a great person," she said. "He cared about what he was involved in."

Perhaps those most affected by Belgard's legacy are the men who served with him on the police force.

"Very unpretentious" was how Police Chief Terry Medina described Belgard, whom he regarded professionally as a role model and personally as a second father.

"I was a college student with an internship in the district attorney's office when he came in from Monterey County," Medina remembered.

Belgard's work on numerous murder and narcotics cases had already sealed his reputation as a top investigator, and prompted young investigators like Medina to strive for excellence.

When Belgard became police chief and began restructuring the department to higher standards, Medina worked hard to be sure he'd score high enough on police tests to make the cut, just so he



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While he was police chief, Ray Belgard demonstrated his good humor by taking part in the annual tricycle race event in the city plaza, as seen in this undated photo.

could work for Belgard.

Former police captain and mayor Chuck Carter recalled the awe he felt when Belgard took over.

"He had a stellar reputation in law enforcement as an investigator," Carter said. "I appreciated his honesty and his ethics and his leadership. He was just the kind of chief that officers look for."

"His example ... was a major influence on how I tried to frame my job," Carter added. "I'm really proud to have served under him."

"He was not only able to teach us about our career, but he was able to teach us a lot about leadership," Medina recalled. What's more, he said, "The title was never a big thing to him. It didn't make any difference. He would call people back; he would meet people in the lobby. He taught us to do that."

Even if it was a person who called every day, you should call them back every time."

"All of us need to respect what he contributed with his police work," Stucki said. "His dedication and the quality of man he was ... All of the community has lost a real valued man. Not only can you respect him, but you really love him."