

Volunteer retires after 34 years

Volunteer

8.14.14

Isabel Shaffer brings high expectations

By Kara Guzman

kguzman@santacruzsentinel.com
@karambutan on Twitter

SANTA CRUZ » Ask Isabel Shaffer why she's ladled soup for St. Francis Catholic Kitchen for 34 years, and she'll say with her sons grown, she had nothing better to do.

"It's no sense to stay home," said Shaffer, a founding volunteer who retired on Tuesday — on her 89th birthday.

But ask some of the 180 guests

who attend the kitchen's free weekday lunches, and they tell another story.

"She's a wonderful lady, a lot like my mother," said Paul Hurko, who grew quiet as he watched Shaffer greet guests with a bowl of soup, eye contact and a smile. Since becoming homeless 12 years ago, Hurko has visited the kitchen most days. When his mother died, he said he talked to Shaffer about it.

"I already kissed her goodbye

and told her I'd miss her," Hurko said.

Shaffer, a Santa Cruz resident, began serving soup and sandwiches in 1980 at the kitchen's original Beach Flats location. When the kitchen lost that property a year later, Shaffer rode a van around the neighborhood, delivering hot meals.

Francisco Lopez, 67, volunteered with Shaffer on the van in the 1980s and has stayed involved with the kitchen since, occasionally receiving meals.

SHAFER » PAGE 3



Isabel Shaffer, one of the founding members of the St. Francis Catholic Kitchen, is retiring after 34 years.

EMMA BROKAW
— SANTA CRUZ
SENTINEL

THURSDAY, AUGUST 14, 2014

Shaffer

FROM PAGE 1

"She's got a pure heart and a very beautiful spirit," said Lopez. "She's got loving arms for all, even though you're the black sheep in the family."

Shaffer, raised Catholic as a child in Spain, was a professional flamenco dancer in Europe before immigrating to the U.S. in 1947 with her husband, an Air Force B-17 pilot. She has attended Santa Cruz's Holy Cross Church since 1952,

also volunteering as a eucharistic minister, giving communion for 37 years.

The church has steadied her in difficult times, she said.

"It feels wonderful to help somebody and when you give somebody the communion, the precious blood, you feel good," Shaffer said.

Wayne Shaffer, her son and the kitchen's board president, said his mother was raised with Old World sensibilities and brings her sense of decorum to the kitchen. When women arrive in revealing clothing,

she insists they dress modestly before they eat, he said. Or when she overhears guests curse in Spanish, she will call them out, he said.

"She complains about them, but she keeps coming back," he said.

Leinaallie Azevedo, 57, has visited the kitchen since she was 17, and said she used to have disagreements with Isabel Shaffer, but now they're best friends. She hugged Shaffer on Tuesday, and thanked her for her decades of service.

"She's just the kind of person who's old school,

who wants respect," said Azevedo. "I think she has a wonderful heart. She's like my mom. She makes you earn her respect."

Tod Connor, a volunteer leader, said Isabel Shaffer is no bleeding heart. When guests come smelling of alcohol, she'll whisper under her breath, he said.

"She was real, you know. There was no phony like, 'I want to help you and I love you,'" Connor said. "I thought that was really refreshingly honest."

"She has an enormous heart," Connor said. "I think that underlies it all."