

Action in the face of crisis

Businesswoman pulled recovery effort together

By GUY LASNIER
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Two days after the Oct. 17 earthquake, a clear voice broke through a somewhat raucous meeting of downtown merchants and city officials: "If I'm not open the day after Thanksgiving, I'm bankrupt."

The simple message distilled the essence of the feelings in the room. It came from Margaret Wilson, proprietor of Lily Wong's, a unique variety store on the Pacific Garden Mall.

Downtown was shattered. A seemingly impossible deadline loomed.

But, "I never thought it was impossible," Wilson said recently. "I knew it could work."

Wilson said it worked because city staffers and merchants pitched in. "We don't appreciate those folks enough," she said of city workers.

But ask other shopkeepers and the city officials themselves and the same name comes up: Margaret Wilson.

"She was one of the first, hardest working, most thorough and committed of the volunteers," said Charlie Eadie, the associate city planner who was dubbed Incident Commander and controlled access to the mall in the weeks after the Oct. 17 quake.

She was "absolutely wonderful," said other city staffers in Pac-Ops, the military-sounding title for Pacific Avenue operations.

Emotions were high, nerves were frayed. Eadie said Wilson was able to help organize a system of letting people into their businesses. "Margaret was very helpful in identifying what had to be done first," Eadie said.

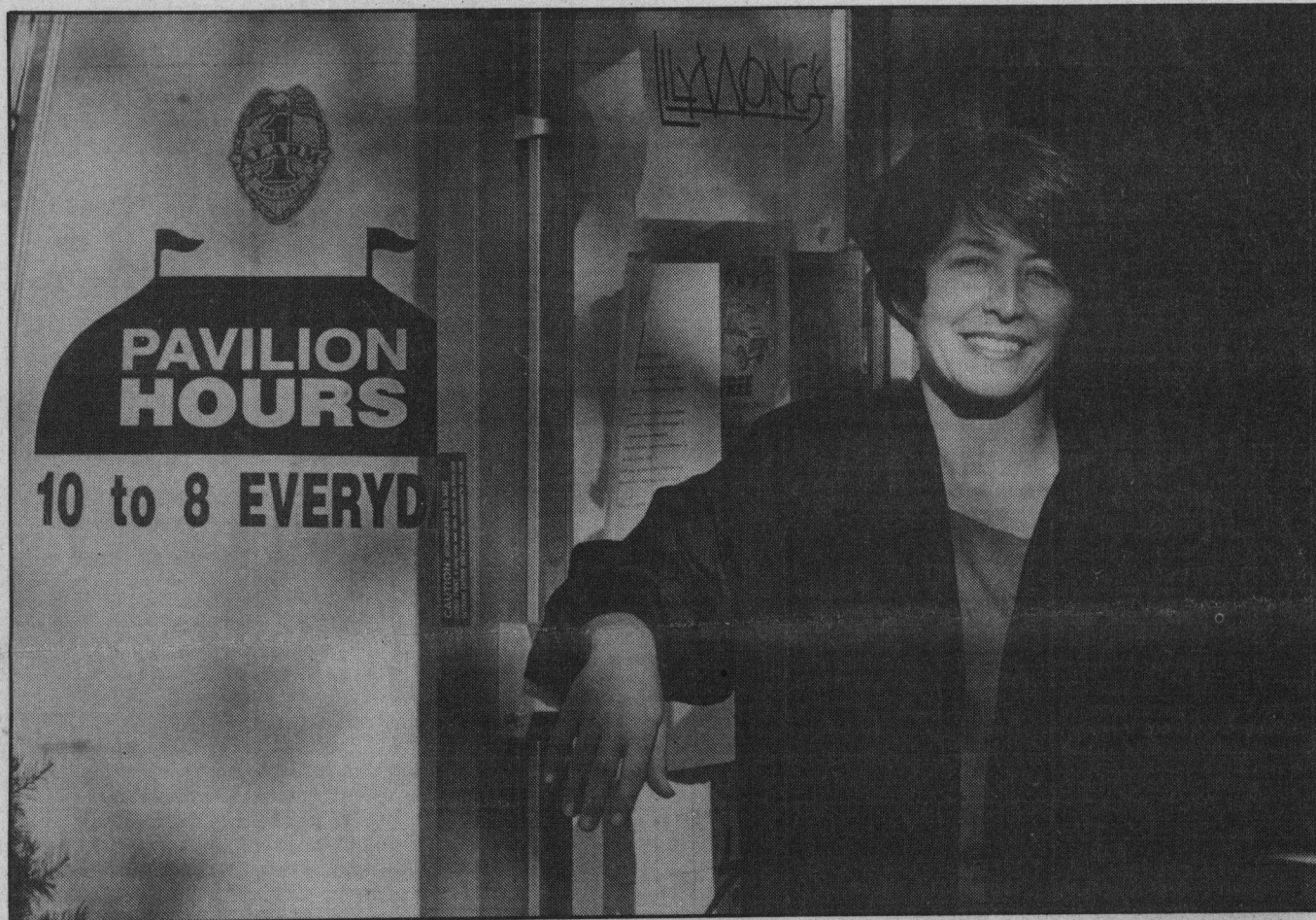
She was given a title: field coordinator. It came with no stripes and no medals, no job description. The Police Department did give her a little pin later on.

Wilson's equipment for the next three weeks consisted of a yellow hard hat, clipboard and walkie-talkie.

"She seemed to be everywhere I went," said Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt, who herself became accustomed to the latest in protective headgear.

"She was exactly what we needed at the time," said Bookshop Santa Cruz owner Neal Coonerty. "Calm, level-headed, resourceful," he said.

"Different people react to tragedy in different ways," Wilson said. "When I'm



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Margaret Wilson, owner of Lily Wong's, says jumping into the fray just comes naturally.

threatened I take charge. I find safety in action, comfort in action.

"Volunteering was my therapy," she said.

Ironically, Wilson's store was one of the last scheduled for controlled entry. When she started to remove the contents, "I fell apart," she said. "I had five people to tackle the rubble." Eventually 30 to 40 others volunteered to help.

Wilson was in Los Angeles when the quake hit, tending to an import business she owns there. After three airline flights were canceled, she drove all night in a car with a banker named Goldfinger, a man she had never met before. Radio news reports said downtown Santa Cruz was flattened. She was convinced her husband and 8½-year-old daughter were dead.

"It was the worst night of my life," she said.

Wilson said she volunteered to ensure merchants' viewpoints were considered. "I liked the advocacy position. I'm a justice seeker," she said. The job "gave me a chance to do service to my community."

'When I'm threatened I take charge. I find safety in action, comfort in action.'

— Margaret Wilson, store owner

The job also put her in the hot seat. She was the one who called store owners to tell them when they could get into their stores. It was never as soon as they wanted.

"My role was a much therapeutic as anything," she said.

Wilson's 9-year-old store was for sale before the quake. She's not sure what she will do with it after Christmas. Although business has been good, she said, she has to tally quake losses.

But she said she feels a new-found excitement in her business and in the downtown. The coming-together of merchants previously suspicious of one another has added to the excitement.

"Change is exciting," she said. "I haven't felt this good about myself, my

business or my community in a long time."

The post-quake work by her and others was character-developing, she said.

And, "I've developed enough character for this lifetime."

Wilson said she wants to participate in the rebuilding process but not as part of the 36-member, non-profit, private-public corporation.

She sees herself participating in one of the specialized task forces, but not in long meetings or debates.

"It's not my style.

"I'm like a guerrilla fighter," she said. "I'm good at going in and getting things done quick and dirty."