

Santa Cruz County DA Bob Lee dies

District Attorney
He served 12 years as District Attorney, nearly 30 years in the office

By Calvin Men

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SANTA CRUZ » Santa Cruz County's top prosecutor Bob Lee, who advocated for justice for victims and was key in implementing the county's largest gang crime team, died in his Santa Cruz home Saturday morning after a battle with cancer. He was 57.

"He has been surrounded for the last several months by an outpouring of support from family, friends and employees of the District Attorney's Office," Chief Deputy District Attorney Jeff Rosell said Saturday.

Lee's death comes 10 days after he released a statement announcing his battle with cancer.

"In recent months, I have been battling the acute ravages of an

invasive and persistent cancer. I wish there was more encouraging news to report," he said. "Unfortunately, for every step forward in the last several months, there have been one or more steps backward. I have won many battles but, quite frankly, seem to be losing the war."

Lee was crucial in starting the Santa Cruz County Gang Task

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District Attorney Bob Lee updates the media regarding the fatal shooting of two Santa Cruz police officers in this May 23, 2013 photo.

DAN COYRO —
SANTA CRUZ
SENTINEL FILE

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Lee

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Force, an interagency team focused on suppressing gang violence and prosecuting gang members. Lee was key in restructuring the District Attorney's Office, creating units to focus on specific crimes, such as sex offenses, gang crime and white collar criminals.

One of his most recent notable involvements was assisting the Sheriff's Office investigation into the brutal murders of two Santa Cruz police officers. No matter the time of day or night, whenever a significant crime happened, Lee would report to the scene to play a role in the investigation, sometimes prosecuting the case himself.

Earlier this month Sheriff Phil Wowak said, "I've spent many long nights and many 24-hour and 36-hour days with him and that's really what made him stand out as DA."

Current and former colleagues noted his passion for justice and his intelligence in the courtroom.

Prosecutor Rob Wade remembers talking about trial strategies with Lee, astounded by the insights that came from him.

"When you were as good as Bob had been, well, he never wanted to really get out of the business of trying cases," Wade said. "I can just tell you there are people in my office he's mentored tremendously."

"He was always working at trying to teach other young lawyers how to become better trial lawyers and be better in court," Wade said.

Some of what Lee modeled his strategies on were based off of Sherlock Holmes, the fictional detec-



DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL FILE

Santa Cruz County District Attorney Bob Lee at the command center on the afternoon of Feb. 26, 2013 when two Santa Cruz police officers were shot and killed.

tive known for using logic to deduce the crime. Lee read the books and often said trial lawyers should read them to learn the concept of looking at facts and drawing inferences, Wade said.

"He won some cases that a less accomplished prosecutor could not have won," said Santa Cruz County Judge Ariadne Symons, who was Lee's deputy chief for years.

She remembered his passion in the courtroom and his unwavering focus on the victims. Symons said Lee loved prosecuting cases and could see that each case was important.

Presiding Judge Paul Marigonda, who also worked as a prosecutor with Lee, called Lee a colleague and friend.

"He was one of the best trial attorneys that we've had," he said. "He could read a Santa Cruz County jury better than anybody I've ever seen."

Much like with Symons, Marigonda said Lee never leveraged their friendship after Marigonda was elected.

"I could say 'Bob, it's me Paul. This is what we've got,'" Marigonda said. "I

BOB LEE

Born: Oct. 12, 1957

Died: Oct. 18, 2014

Occupation: Santa Cruz County District Attorney

Education: Bachelor's degree in public administration from Sacramento State; law degree from Santa Clara University.

Survivors: Lee is survived by his mother, Phyllis; wife, Barbara; and brothers, Doug, Mark and Bill.

Services: Funeral services are pending.

could talk to him the way I could talk to him when we were prosecutors together."

Watsonville Police Chief Manny Solano simply said he'll miss Lee as both a friend and a colleague.

"We will forever be indebted to him for the leadership he provided in the toughest of times," Solano said. "His legacy and the impact he made toward the betterment of others will live on for years to come."

Rosell reiterated the sentiments.

"He had a tremendous drive to make sure that victims' voices were heard in the criminal justice system," he said.

One lesson Rosell re-

members from his 20 years of working with Lee was to make sure trauma victims were comfortable. Lee demonstrated the lesson to Rosell by letting children, who were victims of a crime, see the courtroom, adjust to it and even ride skateboards there.

"He was incredibly caring and thoughtful," Rosell said.

Born Oct. 12, 1957, Lee grew up in Santa Cruz County. He earned a bachelor's degree in public administration from Sacramento State in 1980 and law degree from Santa Clara University four years later. After graduating, he worked as a law clerk in the Santa Cruz County for three years before becoming a prosecutor in Monterey County. He returned to the county as a prosecutor in 1988.

Among the programs he implemented, his most recent was helping to usher forth the Downtown Accountability Program, which handles repeat offenders in Santa Cruz.

An avid San Francisco Giants fan, Lee watched the team earn a spot in the World Series on Thursday. Lee was a fan till the end, even coordinating his funeral services around the games, Rosell said.

"He wanted to make sure his services did not conflict with the Giants games," he said. "He loved the Giants."

While Lee, who ran unopposed to win a fourth term, which he would have started in January, he announced he would not be able to serve the term and urged the County Board of Supervisors to appoint Rosell as his successor.

Board of Supervisors Chairman Zach Friend said earlier this month he ex-

pects the Board to appoint Rosell to district attorney. The appointment will be until the next general election in 2016, at which point a two-year term will be on the ballot.

Friend could not be reached to comment Saturday.

Lee is survived by his mother, Phyllis; wife, Barbara; and brothers, Doug, Mark and Bill.