

Santa Cruz AIDS Project co-founder Wesley Harris dies

By TOM LONG
Sentinel staff writer

APTOS — Wesley Harris, a founder of the Santa Cruz AIDS Project and one of the first local people with AIDS to speak in public about his disease, died Friday afternoon at his Aptos home. He was 51.

"I think his style, his gentle demeanor and his non-threatening posture really allowed people to empathize with the experience and put a human face on the epidemic," said local psychologist Jerry Solomon, another of the six founders of SCAP. "He approached the situation with just a small amount of fear and a great deal of bravery."

A native of Mt. Clemens, Mich., Harris was a communications specialist in the U.S. Air Force for 20 years. During that time he was married and fathered five children before divorcing.

After leaving the military he attended Santa Clara University, earning a master's degree in marriage, family and child counseling. He then became a practicing therapist in the San Jose and later Santa Cruz areas.

Harris first became ill as a result of the HIV virus, which causes AIDS, eight years ago. Since then he and his lifetime companion, Gerald Landers, have been in the forefront of the local AIDS education movement. Landers served as executive director for SCAP in its early years and Harris served on its board of directors.

After leaving the board, Harris became an active participant of Project First Hand, a program that sends people with AIDS to local schools and organizations to talk about their experiences with the disease.

"He was very good at speaking, he just had good communication skills,"

said Margie Brown, a current member of the SCAP board. "He was just very warm and there; he was there 120 percent."

Harris survived for eight years despite having symptoms of AIDS, and many locally who have tested positive for HIV have adopted his attitude toward medical treatment, Solomon said.

"He created a model that lots of people look to," said Landers. "I think he looked at his own health and his relationship with his doctor as a partnership, and that he got to question along the way and join in on the decision-making."

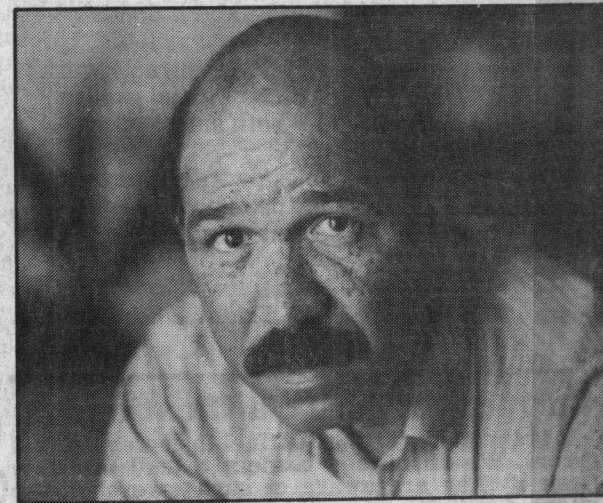
Harris spent the past few months gardening at his home and at the ocean, "enjoying the waves and the fish," according to another friend, Sally Blumenthal. "Not always catching either

one, but enjoying life to the fullest."

He is survived by his parents, Grover and Bernice Harris Sr., of Michigan; his sons, Wesley Harris Jr., of San Leandro, Jerry Harris of Watsonville, Adrien Harris of Munich, Germany, and Jeffry Harris of Michigan; his daughter, Lynn Richards of Mountain View; seven brothers and seven sisters; four grandchildren; and his companion, Gerald Landers.

Memorial services will be 7 p.m. Monday at St. John the Baptist Episcopal Church, 216 Oakland Ave., Capitola, with Norman's Family Chapel in charge of arrangements. A day of celebration will follow at the Harris home in Aptos.

Memorial contributions to SCAP, 1606 Soquel Ave., Santa Cruz 95062, are preferred.



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel file

Wesley Harris: He 'put a human face on the epidemic.'