



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt: 'Life isn't just quite the same again.'

✓ A time to rise to the occasion

Quake thrust mayor into the spotlight

By GREG BEEBE

Sentinel staff writer

MAYOR MARDI Wormhoudt's home was built in 1872. "It feels like it's falling down when the washer is on the spin cycle downstairs."

So, at 5:04 p.m. on Tuesday, Oct. 17 — when the 7.1-magnitude Loma Prieta earthquake violently shook the town she has served since her election to the City Council in 1981 — "I really didn't have any idea how bad it was, judging from my house ...

"My very first thought was, 'What happened in San Francisco?'

Like a lot of other people, I always assumed the really big earthquake on the San Andreas Fault would be in San Francisco. Plus, I have family there. It never occurred to me that the quake was *that* close to us ...

"It's not like I didn't have a clear indication, but I don't know, maybe it was denial or shock," said Wormhoudt.

"I just immediately decided to leave and go to City Hall," she said. "I was at City Hall by 10 after 5 at the latest. ...

"And I just felt like I was never really off-duty after that."

Please see WORMHOUDT — A4

Continued from Page A1

Wormhoudt quickly discovered that the quake had hit home. Major portions of the Pacific Garden Mall were in ruins, and three persons lay dead downtown, crushed by falling debris.

"It still amazes me how anything that could only last 15 seconds could so irrevocably change life. I still feel that, I do," she said. "I mean, there are still times when I just can't believe it."

"My life will never be exactly the same again, and I don't think anyone's will. When you've gone through something so significant, it doesn't leave you the same. Once you realize that the terra firma isn't, life just isn't quite the same again."

In the course of 15 seconds, Wormhoudt's job description changed from mayor of a small, liberally idealistic, tourist city to grief counselor, ombudswoman and public-information officer.

"Almost immediately, one thing was very clear," Wormhoudt said. "The year preceding the earthquake had been a very difficult year in Santa Cruz politically."

"There was a recall going on, with much brouhaha about the Navy ship. And whatever one's attitude about that, it was clear most people in Santa Cruz thought they had the luxury of having arguments about ideological issues, taking positions and then arguing some kind of absolute position."

"It seemed clear to me — from almost the first hour that I walked down the mall that night — that nobody had that luxury anymore. People were going to have set aside politics."

Wormhoudt shed her political baggage. She met droves of press. She fielded questions, answered telephones, soothed nerves. She sought state and federal disaster assistance, and consoled the families of quake victims.

"That was a role that I played. ... People were in this office every day, who couldn't get into their buildings, who had terrible stories, absolutely awful things, people who thought they were getting the runaround. I spent a lot of time dealing with people and trying to get information out to people."

"Did I wish I hadn't been mayor? I never thought about it, frankly. But I had thought about (the fact that) since I was mayor, what did I need to do that was the most useful role to the public?"

"It made for some very, very long days. I'd go to sleep sometime after midnight and the phone would start ringing at 5 o'clock the next morning. It was very intense, and I think, like a lot of other people, I suppose I got through it on adrenaline and sugar. ...

'YOU'RE IN A ROLE in which you're kind of called upon to do things. I chose to be the kind of mayor I chose to be during the earthquake. In a disaster, there's a kind of chain of command, kind of a military model, and there really isn't a role for the elected officials. The electeds could just kind of go home and get briefed on what was happening."

"I did make a decision. I basically decided that ... I wasn't going to turn that (role) over to a bureaucrat, that people really wanted to hear from somebody who could tell them what was going on, who wasn't going to hide behind 'I can't talk about that' or 'I don't know about that yet.'"

"I tried to be always as candid as I could be with people and give out absolutely as much information as I could. I just decided that was my role, to try to speak for the city and represent the city in a public sense because people were so upset and there was such a need for information and people really wanted that to have a kind of human face to it."

Tears flowed down Wormhoudt's human face when, on Oct. 19, rescue workers removed the body of 22-year-old Robin Ortiz from the ruins of the Santa Cruz Coffee Roasting Co. Friends of the victim were incensed when the search for Ortiz was suspended the night before because of safety concerns. The next afternoon, Ortiz's friends angrily lashed out at the city and members of the news media, who had come from all over the nation and the world to cover the disaster.

"I decided that I was not going to talk to the press or anyone else until I had a chance to talk to the family alone," Wormhoudt said. "That was one deci-



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file

Mardi Wormhoudt joins Gov. George Deukmejian for a tour of mall following the quake.

'I have probably worked hard to be rational and analytical and not terribly emotional, but ... there were some times when I certainly lost it in public.'

— Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt

sion I made and some people criticized that, particularly members of the press, but I had to think about how I would want to be treated in a similar situation."

As Wormhoudt announced to the media and onlookers that the body found crushed to death in the rubble was Ortiz, the mayor cried. It was an emotional glimpse at a public servant previously known for her political savvy, quick thinking and equally deft wit.

"I'm kind of an emotional person, but when you're in public office you don't run around sort of weeping, especially as a woman in politics. My first two years I was the only woman on the City Council, so I felt like I got belittled and patronized a certain amount of the time because I was a woman."

"I have probably worked hard to be rational and analytical and not terribly emotional, but obviously like everybody else I was pretty emotional after the earthquake ... There were some times when I certainly lost it in public," Wormhoudt said.

"I think the hardest part of the whole experience for Mardi must have been dealing with Robin Ortiz's family and the families of everybody who died in the earthquake," said Matt Farrell of the city's Public Works Department. "A big part of the whole experience fell pretty heavily on the mayor, and that takes something out of you."

"Mardi is a very strong person," said City Manager Dick Wilson. "She affirmed over and over again, in the blackest hours, that we would recover, that we would rebuild."

Wormhoudt's husband Ken said, "She has a great capacity to move with situations and I think she showed a lot of courage to take on that job. I don't think it was one that she relished — the city has so many factions and so many splits — and she was working all the time, basically. It increased her work load threefold. And I know there were times when she was very depressed with the idea of a whole community center disappearing very quickly."

"She has always been a good listener. People would go to Mardi to talk over their problems."

Even political foes of Wormhoudt admit she did a good job in the aftermath of the disaster. "In many respects the mayor has done an admirable job," said businessman Lou Rittenhouse, who is running for a seat on the City Council which Wormhoudt will leave in November.

"She certainly had a great deal to contend with. Probably the only thing I can see fault in is there's a significant reason why we are where we are — without a lot of construction going on (downtown), and that is her lack of ability as a visionary," Rittenhouse said. "There's an incredible amount of effort put into going back to where we were, but reality is

such that we're never going to be where we were."

John Laird, for nine years Wormhoudt's City Council colleague, said, "I'm generally a very tough critic of people in public office and I almost cannot think of a thing that she didn't do right in the weeks and months after the earthquake."

"She really showed a resiliency and at the same time a sort of tenderness and humanity that some people just hadn't seen before."

"It will be tough for there ever to be a low-key, out-of-the-limelight mayor again. She set nearly an impossible standard to be judged against," Laird said.

THE ROLE OF MAYOR of Santa Cruz, which traditionally had been not much more than a symbolic position, took on new meaning under Wormhoudt. One month after the earthquake — with Councilwoman Jane Yokoyama scheduled to assume the role as mayor — the council opted to extend Wormhoudt's term through November 1990.

"There were two major concerns," Laird said. "One was that many people felt that Mardi needed to continue because of the strong leadership she provided, and continuity. The second concern was that by all rights it was Jane's turn to be mayor."

"If there was to be a continuation of Mardi as mayor, Jane needed to be very understanding and supportive, and she was. I don't think it was really Mardi's initiation that she serve another term. She told a couple of her colleagues that she was open if asked, but I think she was very sensitive to Jane's feelings. It was the right thing to do at the time," Laird said.

As the one-year anniversary of the earthquake nears, Wormhoudt acknowledged that political life has fully resumed in Santa Cruz.

"There was a temporary suspension of politics that certainly went on for some period of months. It's over now. I really do believe there were a lot of people who genuinely acted in supportive ways of each other who never had (acted that way) before, and there were people who really did try to set aside differences and figure out how to work together. ...

"I think it's more like stages of grieving. First, you've got shock and denial and then you have terrible sadness and then you often have a period when people feel like they care and come together with people they love in real supportive and good ways," Wormhoudt said.

"In a way that was the easy period. Now there's an incredible amount of frustration and some disillusionment. Now, obviously, it's almost a year later and the city's not back together again, and in fact, it's far from it."

"And although a lot has been done, really, it's not a dent in what needs to be done. So this is a difficult period, I think, and it's not like there's an event that marks that. I don't relive the earthquake every time I go downtown, but, it depends. Like a lot of people, I go back and forth in what I think. For the most part I think Santa Cruz is going to be fine, that we will rebuild."

"We have one of the most incredibly beautiful places on the central coast. It's a place that's just a natural for tourism. This is not Flint, Mich. So, ultimately, I don't have worry that Santa Cruz will rebuild and will be prosperous and healthy once again," Wormhoudt said.

Wormhoudt's nine-year council term ends in November. A break from political life will be an opportunity to, at last, deal with her own business, she said.

"On a personal level, unlike certain other people whose job it was to deal with the earthquake, I felt I never did get around to dealing with it, as far as the emotional impact."

"I have spent a lot of time my the past year telling people how things were going to be OK, what we're going to do and how we're going to make things work, how we're going to rebuild downtown and how we're going to find housing and as a result of that, when something comes up in relation to this that's painful or emotional, I'm never more than about that far away from tears."

"I still have this feeling that there's something out there that I have to deal with for myself."