

Pioneering South County Educator, Leader Ann Soldo Dies

Long-time Pajaro Valley educator and Watsonville's first female mayor Ann Matiasovich Soldo died on Jan. 24 at age 90, leaving a legacy of community leadership from a lifetime of good deeds.

A native of Pajaro whose father was a Croatian immigrant, Soldo spent nearly four decades working in South County schools, first as a teacher and then as principal of several schools, including Aptos Junior High. When she retired from education, she successfully ran for the Watsonville city council and was elected mayor by voters in 1983, the first woman to hold that position.

Throughout her life she was active in community organizations, serving on numerous non-profit boards from the local chapter of the Delta Cappa Gamma teachers' society to Watsonville Community Hospital. She spearheaded the campaigns to build the Henry Mello Performing Arts Center and rebuild St. Patrick's Catholic Church after it was damaged in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

Among the stories she



shared with friends was how, when she was first teaching at Hall District School, she also drove the bus to pick up students and stopped to get milk for the cafeteria along the way.

"That was Ann - doing everything that was needed," said Jane Borg of the Pajaro Valley Historical Association.

"She was a woman who was totally committed to doing whatever was needed in our community," agreed longtime associate Dr. Janet Bell.

"She was always teaching. When she became an administrator, she was teaching teachers, and when she was on the city council she was still teaching and listening," said Nancy Bilicich, herself

now both an administrator in the school district and city council member. She grew up down the street from Soldo and considered her a mentor.

"She was special to me and I think to many people in the community," said Bilicich.

"I know for many women who followed her, she was the first they would turn to for advice," echoed Borg.

The Pajaro Valley Unified School District named an elementary school for Soldo in 1999.

Soldo was proud of her Croatian heritage and with husband, Andrew, hosted the "Yugoslavian Radio Program" from 1957 to 1988, featuring traditional music and news from the local community. Each would read the same news over the air, one in Croatian and the other in English.

In 2003, she donated 1,800 records and tapes of Slavic music to the archives at Stanford University, where she earned a master's degree.

Soldo's influence is recorded in *Blossoms Into Gold* a book by fellow local Slavic-Americans Donna Mekis and Kathryn Mekis Miller. ■