

# She's betting her life for the homeless

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**BEN LOMOND** — Jane Imler says she isn't a martyr, but if she has to starve herself to death to get a shelter built for the homeless, she will.

"There comes a time when you have to put your life on the line for what you believe in," explained Imler, who said she has not eaten since her publicly-declared hunger strike Nov. 18.

"We just keep going around and around in circles. They have money to renovate the wharf, they have money to redecorate the third, fourth and fifth floors of the County Center, but they don't have enough money to help the homeless."

Imler told City Council members and county supervisors she would not eat until they set up a cold- and rainy-night shelter for the homeless.

The former social worker said she became frustrated at local officials' unwillingness to help the homeless.

City Council members recently approved a shelter on a six-months' trial basis for the St. Francis Catholic Housing project. They approved a 25-bed facility at Golf Club Drive and River Street for the overnight shelter to be operated by soup kitchen founder Peter Carota and his staff. Carota had wanted a 100-bed facility.

However, the project fell through after shelter supporters could not get an exclusive option to buy the property, according to Carota. Carota also partly blamed delays in obtaining governmental approval for the failed project.

At 9 a.m. Tuesday, the city zoning administrator will con-

sider a request from Carota to use the soup kitchen, located on Mora Street, as a temporary shelter.

Council members voted last week to urge the administrator to "favorably consider" the request for a 90-day permit.

County Shelter Project Coordinator Paul Brindel last week reported to council members some beds at the county's various shelters have been unused in recent weeks.

Imler's action came after supervisors enacted a camping ban for key areas of the county and after plans for a shelter to be built by the St. Francis Housing Project fell through, partly because of neighborhood opposition to the project.

The serious, soft-spoken Ben Lomond resident said she has kept her promise, consuming only vitamins and lemon-flavored water. For Thanksgiving, she helped prepare the turkey for family and friends.

She said her doctor advised her to take more vitamins, "but that's a little bit too life sustaining," she adds matter of factly.

Saturday morning, she felt dizzy and went to Dominican Hospital, where she was treated and released, according to a nursing supervisor.

Imler has only one kidney, and the possibility of renal failure complicates her fast.

"My doctor is going to start monitoring once or twice a week," she said.

But she said she will continue her fast until there is at least a 50-bed shelter for the homeless.

People who know her say she is serious.

"Everyone's really concerned that she might die and that



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**— Jane Imler,  
hunger striker**

nothing is happening to help the homeless in Santa Cruz," said Carota.

Carota said he respected Imler's decision to put her life on the line for a cause she believes in.

He said he and a group of the soup kitchen's supporters will be going on a fast — though not to the death — to call attention to the problems of the homeless in Santa Cruz.

Other advocates for the homeless have not ignored her declaration. A flyer being distributed by one group lists statistics about the transient population and ends with the plea, "You can get a shelter open — save Jane Imler's life by calling your supervisor or the City Council."

Elected officials, on the other hand, say Imler has been fairly low-key about her hunger strike.

"Oddly enough, she's been fairly quiet about it," said council member Mardi Warmhoudt.

Imler's fast might call attention to the plight of the homeless, but it's not likely to make the bureaucratic wheels spin any faster, Warmhoudt said.

"I don't think it will have any effect on whether a shelter is built," said Warmhoudt. "There is a willingness to do it, but the problems are fairly extensive and I'm not sure these problems can be overcome because of an emotional appeal."

A onetime student at UCSC, Imler moved to Santa Cruz from Los Angeles in January. Before that, she and her actor-husband split their time between Santa Cruz and Southern California, where her husband did most of his work. He played the judge in "The Burning Bed."

The couple live in a cozy, airy home in Ben Lomond which they are renting.

Imler said she has worked on behalf of the homeless for most of her life. "As a child, I took in all

kind of homeless animals," she said, smiling. "When I was in my 20s I worked at a hospital in Chicago — it was like a poor farm."

Imler was one of the organizers of the Tent City project in Los Angeles last year, which helped keep 1,500 people out of the rain and cold under two huge heated tents.

She said she wanted to do nothing more in Santa Cruz than finish her bachelor's degree in American Studies at UCSC when a friend took her to see Carota's soup kitchen.

"I didn't realize the extent of it here," said Imler. She started to work on various groups seeking to get a place for the homeless to stay.

She suggested the county put people in an auditorium under the Emeline Street health offices. She also suggested the Loudon Nelson Auditorium and the basement of the County Center as likely shelters.

Her husband and two adult children support her decision to stage a hunger strike, "but there's also some anger there, too," Imler said. "They're very concerned about my health ... I'm not the best candidate for a fast, as I have only 39 percent of my kidney functions."

What if it takes four weeks to get a shelter and Imler survives for only three and a half weeks?

"Then I'll have to die," she said softly. "I came to grips with death a long time ago, when I lost my kidney. There's no reason not to have a shelter for the homeless, and there's no reason it should take that long."

**Sentinel Staff Writer Joan Raymond also contributed to this report.**