

DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Homeless Services Center Executive Director Monica Martinez, center, has made major changes at the facility to alleviate issues reported by Harvey West business owners, neighborhood watchdogs, police and city officials including loitering, drug sales and vandalism.

# Homeless center's new director makes WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

*Homeless - 2000*  
Monica Martinez  
applauded  
for improving  
security,  
relationships  
with neighbors

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first in a series of articles the Sentinel will publish through the end of the year about the people, events and issues that dominated the headlines and made a difference in 2010.

By J.M. BROWN  
[jbrown@santacruzsentinel.com](mailto:jbrown@santacruzsentinel.com)

SANTA CRUZ — When Monica Martinez took the reins of the Homeless Services Center this spring, she inherited a public relations quandary.

Her predecessor had been fired amid allegations he molested an underage girl in Los Angeles, charges to which he later pleaded no

contest. And in the months leading up to her appointment, Harvey West business owners, neighborhood watchdogs, police and city officials had been coming down on the center over loitering, drug sales and vandalism occurring just outside its gates.

Fresh from four years of helping homeless women on L.A.'s Skid Row, Martinez wasn't accustomed to getting much attention in the big city. But in Santa Cruz, where homeless services have long been divisive, she quickly found herself under a microscope.

The only thing she could do was listen, then act.

SEE MARTINEZ ON A2

# MARTINEZ

Continued from A1

"There was an apparent gap in leadership and people felt they weren't being heard," she said.

Eight months later, some of the center's biggest critics roundly applaud a number of changes Martinez has put into effect, including a ban on clients who break rules of conduct. Also, day center visitors must get involved in neighborhood cleanup operations or other volunteer programs if they aren't looking for a job or permanent housing.

The 28-year-old triathlete, who has a master's degree in nonprofit management from the University of Southern California, has improved security by offering guards full-time jobs with benefits and created a "no-impact zone" from Harvey West Park to the Highway 1 and Highway 9 intersection for staff and clients to patrol. She has attended a number of community meetings to share her vision for improving the center's relationship with the rest of the city.

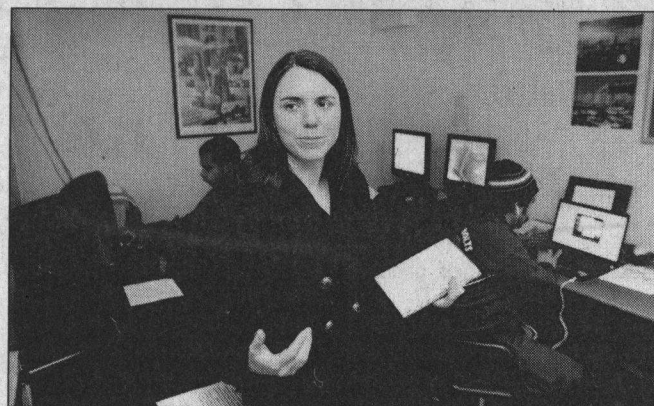
For those reasons, Martinez is a Sentinel newsmaker for 2010.

## 'OPEN HEART, OPEN HAND'

Martinez oversees the center's wide array of services, including short- and long-term housing for individuals and families, as well as a daytime activity center and a kitchen that services meals for 200 daily. But critics have been most concerned about what goes on outside the shelter.

Before Martinez started, Analicia Cube, a founder of the anti-crime advocacy group Take Back Santa Cruz, would park across the street and call police when she saw drug deals go down among groups of people gathered outside. Now, Cube meets with Martinez inside the center.

"Monica had an open heart and open hand, and we're



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

**After taking over as Homeless Services Center executive director, Monica Martinez put into effect a ban on clients who break rules of conduct, among other changes.**

going to work together," Cube said. "The bottom line is we want to be a community of loving human beings, and we want the crime element out. It's hurting families at the shelter who are trying to better their lives. I feel hopeful for the first time."

Capt. Steve Clark, who has been the Police Department's point person on the shelter, is pleased with the progress Martinez and her staff had made, but said there is still work to be done.

"She is battling much more than just the logistics," he said. "She is instilling a sense of responsibility where there was once a sense of entitlement among a portion of the population at the center. She is working hard to change those attitudes and behaviors."

Greg Woolever, who owns Polar Automotive and Radiator Service across the street from the center, said the environment is better than when his wife and father confronted the center's interim leaders over crime issues last spring. "She is definitely making a difference and we definitely appreciate it," he said of Martinez.

Board member Claudia Brown has attended meetings with Martinez and concerned groups, like Take Back Santa Cruz and Santa Cruz Neighbors.

"Monica is doing a great job

of keeping people informed about what she's doing and seeking input," Brown said. "She is asking, 'What do you see and what are your priorities? How can we use your insights and strengths because this is not a one-person, one-organization issue.'"

## MAKING CHANGE

One of the most notable changes at the center, which receives 11 percent of its funding from the city, is the new ocean-inspired mural painted by clients, local students and center staff on a cement wall behind the Page Smith Community House, a transitional housing program. The idea was to add beauty, as well as eyes and ears, to the highly trafficked railroad tracks behind the center, where trash and drug refuse was piling up.

Martinez said, "It's so easy to sit there for six or eight hours a day. We're asking them to be part of the service."

She changed security guard Stephen Nelson's title to community services coordinator, and he now leads clients on cleanup and patrol operations around the neighborhood. Nelson tells clients that loitering is not OK.

"I try to convince them, if we lose, everyone loses" and that hanging around or acting inappropriately outside the center "brings negative

## BIOGRAPHY

MONICA MARTINEZ

**AGE:** 28

**RESIDENCE:** Felton

**OCCUPATION:** Executive director, Homeless Services Center

**EDUCATION:** Bachelor's degree in political science at California Polytechnic State University; master's degree in nonprofit management from University of Southern California

**IN THE NEWS:** After taking over the Homeless Services Center in Santa Cruz, Monica Martinez reined in the drug sales, loitering and vandalism outside the center's gates, improving relationships with Harvey West neighbors and police as a result.

attention to the center and neighborhood," he said.

In addition to improving relationships in the community, Martinez is working to revamp programs inside the center to be more geared toward moving people out of homelessness. She is beefing up the center's "Empowerment Center," where clients can use computers to find jobs and access other services.

"We want to provide shelter during a time of need, but we want to help them toward a path out of the shelter, into their own permanent housing," Martinez said.

Vice Mayor Don Lane, a longtime volunteer at the center, called Martinez "brilliant" and said changes she is making will help the public distinguish between people in need and illegal activity. He said people who get excluded from the center for bad behavior will "not disappear from the community" and there will still be problems with overnight camping, but he added, "What's happening now is people are sharpening the distinctions."