

BUZ BEZORE: 1945-2014

# Making headlines

Bio-B

3-12-14

Bezore embodied the spirit of the freethinking alternative press in Santa Cruz

By WALLACE BAINE

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SANTA CRUZ — Ask anyone you know who's been involved in Santa Cruz journalism during the past 40 years and odds are good that he or she will have a story about Buz Bezore, probably several stories, many of them off the record.

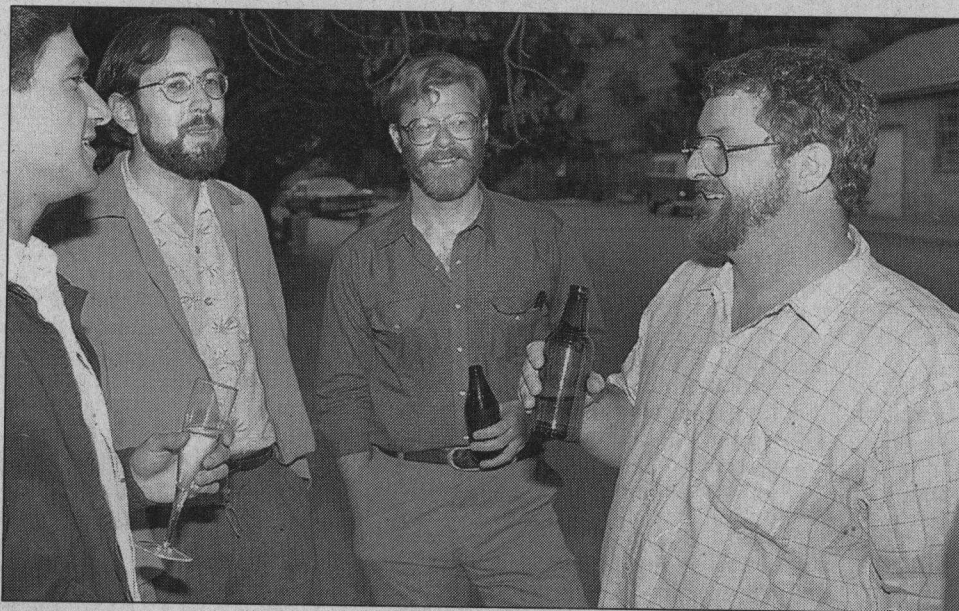


BEZORE

Bezore, who died at the age of 68 on March 6, was the kind of ink-stained figure who could have only emerged from the period between the emergence of "underground" newspapers in the 1960s and the bloggy brave new world of the Internet age. As an editor for several different alternative newspapers from the 1970s to the 1990s, Bezore was an alpha presence in the world of journalism in his era.

He surfed the ever-changing world of the alternative press in a period in which alternative weeklies often didn't survive more than a few years. His luggage was stickered with many of the half-forgotten names of local journalism's golden era, having served as an editor at the Santa Cruz Weekly (an unrelated precursor to the paper that now bears that name), the Santa Cruz Independent, the Santa Cruz Express and Metro Santa Cruz (the paper that eventually became today's Santa Cruz Weekly).

"I loved Buz," said writer and historian Geoffrey Dunn. "I would have written for him forever. He brought out the best of me



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Buz Bezore, far right, holds court at a party for the staff of the Santa Cruz Express in 1985 in downtown Santa Cruz. Cartoonist Tim Eagan is second from right.

as a writer."

While Bezore's professional life was filled with melodrama — many of his editing jobs ended with shattered relationships — his personal life was characterized by tragedy. In 1976, his wife Vicki was murdered by a criminal on parole at the time of the killings. He had a son who died. In the late '90s, Bezore was hospitalized for a staph infection in his spine that almost killed him and greatly diminished his health. For the past decade, he withdrew

from public life.

"Everything that could go wrong in that man's life did go wrong," said his longtime partner and collaborator Christina Waters. "But he was always heroic in how he lived. He was a man who was incapable of being downbeat. He was always positive."

"He had a dark side to him," said friend Lee Quarnstrom, the former Merry Prank-

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# BUZ

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## BIOGRAPHY

LEONARD 'BUZ' BEZORE

ster and Hustler editor who was a longtime columnist for the San Jose Mercury News. "I had always assumed that was related to what happened to his former wife. Buz's family had been taken from him, or had fallen away from him, and he felt orphaned in that way."

At the same time, Bezore — whose given name was Leonard — was something of a bon vivant, a life-of-the-party wit who made, and often lost, friends with ease.

"He was a good dinner companion," said Quarnstrom, "and a good drinking companion. We ate a lot of meals together trying to out-gourmet one another."

"The amazing thing about Buz," said longtime Santa Cruz Sentinel reporter and editor Tom Honig in reference to his family tragedies, "was that he was never embittered by it. He was never embittered by anything. He just always had a strong spirit about him."

### EX-PRESS

Bezore began his journalism career with some of the weeklies that popped up in Santa Cruz at the end of the 1960s, but found his stride as editor-in-chief of the

Express. "We had called ourselves the 'ex-press' because we had all been fired," said Bezore in an oral history of Santa Cruz's alternative journalism scene in Metro Santa Cruz in 2004.

It may have been the only time that Bezore worked without someone to answer to, and he thrived.

"Buz always wanted to have his own paper and do exactly what he wanted his way," said Waters.

The Express addressed a real journalistic need in the community. The daily Sentinel was seen as a conservative newspaper. Weeklies such as the Phoenix appealed to doctrinaire political voices, while the weekly Good Times operated under the slogan "Lighter Than Air." In between all those papers, the Express staked out a claim for substantial cultural and political reporting and Bezore's

approach was through excellence in art and writing. His cover art and headline writing skills are legendary. But also he worked to cultivate young writers who became idiosyncratic and interesting voices in Santa Cruz. They included Christina Waters, Geoffrey Dunn, Rob Breznsky, Michael S. Gant and Stephen Kessler.

Kessler was a poet who was recruited to be a journalist by Bezore. The two later had a falling out that led to the demise of the Express. But during its heyday, Kessler said that Bezore always wanted to find the essence of Santa Cruz's volatile and ever-changing culture and express that culture through his paper, rather than impose an ideology or style onto the community.

"He really did want to reflect the community, the political complexion, the cultural life," said Kessler who

went on to serve as editor of the Sun. "He wanted his paper to be the paper of the community so that people in Santa Cruz could pick it up and know what was happening in town."

### TRUSTING EDITOR

Bezore urged his writers to find their own voices and let them have free reign with those voices. As an editor, he often found just the right change to transform a piece.

"Part of his genius as an editor," said Kessler, "was how he entrusted writers. He just gave me a page and said, 'Do your thing.'"

"He was the master of the tweak," said Tai Moses, who worked with Bezore at the Metro. "His headlines were great. He always knew how to say the right thing in a caption. It was a gift he had, and in a way, he was a victim of a changing world in which the print media began to disappear and lose influence. He was uniquely suited to print."

"Buz was a difficult guy in a lot of ways," said Honig. "But he had a spirit that you couldn't deny. You couldn't dislike the guy. He was the best satirical writer I ever knew. He was journalism's version of 'The Natural.'"

"He was a social genius," said Waters, with whom he co-authored a guide book to the Monterey Bay area. "He could work a room like no one I've ever seen. You loved him and you hated him. And when he would go from one paper to the next, he would certainly burn his bridges in the classical sense. But it was never about people. He was all about people."

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