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Rotkin, no stranger to demonstrations, was arrested in 1985 at an anti-apartheid protest. Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

# Organization man

Bio-R  
Mayor Rotkin pursues power for the people

By TRACIE WHITE  
Sentinel staff writer

IT'S NOT HARD to see the irony. Santa Cruz Mayor Mike Rotkin, lifelong activist and champion of civil disobedience who has many times protested injustice from the inside of a jail cell, wants to kick the demonstrators off the steps of city hall.

"These people camped out in front of city hall, they (ticked) me off," says Rotkin, speaking as mayor about a handful of homeless activists camped out protesting the city's camping ban and regularly leaving behind human waste, he says, for the city's gardener to clean up.

Sometimes jobs as both mayor and revolutionary just don't jive. He shakes his head. Raises his eyebrows above his wire-rimmed glasses. And keeps them raised as he often does when trying to explain a confusing issue.

Added to his jobs as mayor and revolutionary, first and foremost, Rotkin is always an educator.

"I find myself in a bizarre position," says Rotkin, who is a UC Santa Cruz lecturer, a motorcycle rider, an occasional pot smoker, a musician and a mainstay of Santa Cruz politics for 28 years. "After



Mike Rotkin: Santa Cruz mayor, organizer, revolutionary, educator and basketball player. Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel



# Mayor goes to court

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a life as an activist I'm asking the courts for an injunction against these folks."

A preliminary injunction against the demonstrators was granted Friday.

It's a bizarre position, but not a surprising one. Rotkin, 50-year-old socialist, Marxist lecturer, revolutionary, draft card burner, has spent an awful lot of time over the past three decades worrying about sewer systems, sidewalks, street lights, potholes, and water systems.

He's managed to make time for a few good protests here and there, but tries to stay out of jail while he's sitting as mayor. It's such an inconvenience for his fellow council members when he can't make the meetings due to incarceration.

"Twenty years ago, if you had told me I would be mayor of a town, I would have laughed in your face," he says, scratching his trademark head of curly gray locks. "But I love it."

**I**N 1969 when Rotkin showed up in Santa Cruz, the sheriff called him the "most dangerous man in town." He called himself a socialist-feminist, and started doing what he does best. Organizing. First organizing students, then neighbors, then voters.

He's been one of the key players in changing Santa Cruz politics, helping to transform it from a conservative town to a progressive mecca that consistently makes national headlines for its liberal politics.

"He was a spokesperson for neighborhood issues," says Jane Weed, a former Santa Cruz mayor who was active in politics in the '70s. "He motivated people, told them they could have an effect if they could mobilize. He went door to door, encouraged people to become activists."

In at least a small way, maybe he did help make a revolution.

Rotkin was raised in Washington, D.C., by politically active parents who kept a mimeograph machine on the dining room table. He licked envelopes for Democratic candidates, joined his parents at rallies, kneel-ins and sit-ins, and found time to play lots of sports during high school.

He lettered in football, wrestling and track and was president of the math club.

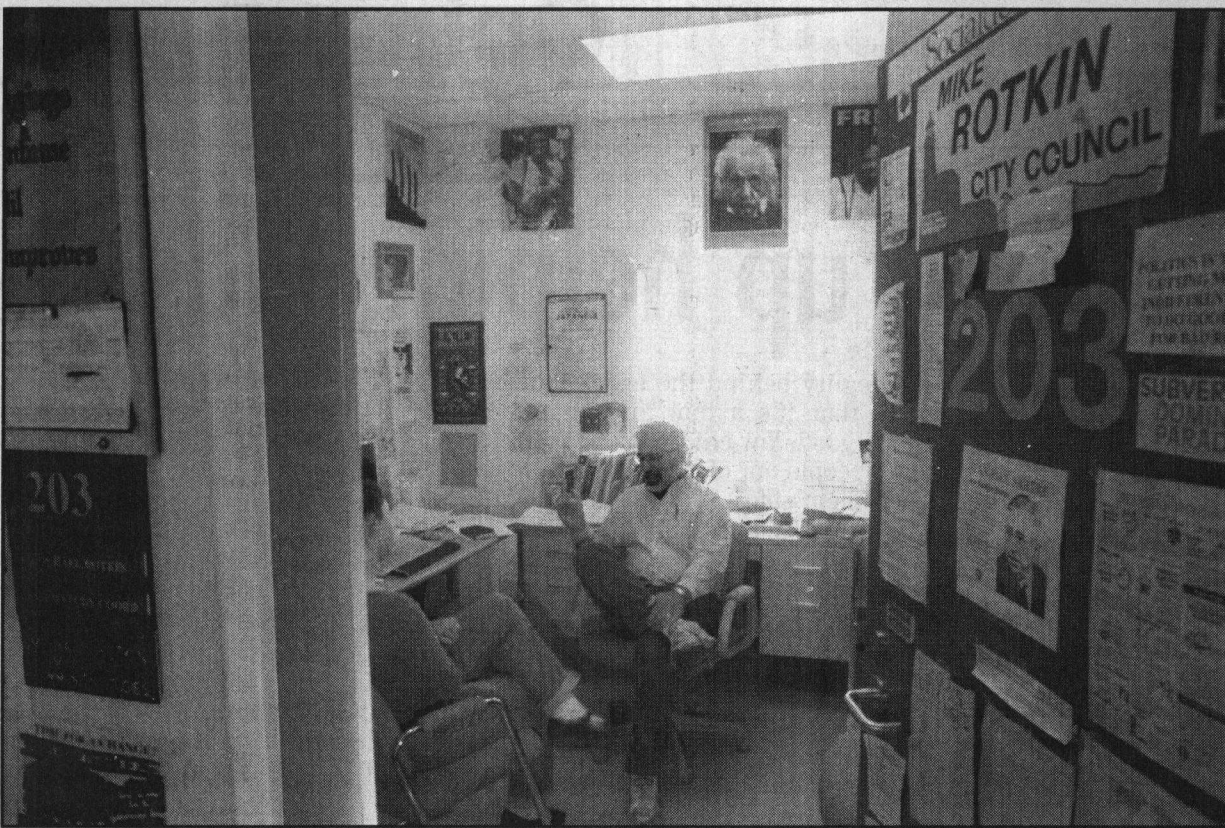
After high school, Rotkin went off to Cornell as an engineering student with plans to save the world. "I wanted to be a nuclear engineer and bring the peaceful atom to India," he explains.

After two years of constantly changing majors and partying with his fraternity, Rotkin suffered a severe "motivational problem," and got kicked out of school.

**I**T WASN'T UNTIL he joined the Vista program — the Peace Corps for America — and was sent into the deep South during the '60s that he began to find his focus in life.

"I was successful as an organizer in the black community," he says.

Rotkin got blacks out to vote in a segregated town of 200 where there were no sewer systems, no roads, no lights. It was in this town, Rotkin says, that he developed his deep hatred of injustice. Traveling the backroads of Florida in the early '60s and getting beat up by cops who called him "nigger lover" helped him discover there might be something wrong with America.



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Rotkin, a community studies lecturer at UCSC, counsels a student in his office at College 8.

But those days also helped teach him "the most important lesson of his life."

"I built a latrine for a woman in her backyard," Rotkin says. "There was no sewer system in this community of 200 blacks. People watching said, 'When are you going to build ours?' I said, 'If you build a hole, I'll build the latrine.' By the third one, I had got young teen-agers building outhouses across town."

"That experience, seeing how a group of people can become empowered with just a catalyst, changed my life."

The experience eventually sent him back to college, this time with a purpose. He went back to Cornell and graduated with highest honors in English literature. At the same time, he became active in the anti-war movement — this time organizing students opposed to the Vietnam War.

"All of a sudden everything was up for grabs," he says.

He smoked a lot of dope, listened to Bob Dylan songs, grew his hair long, lived in a commune, went to sit-ins. Then in 1968, he got married and moved to Santa Cruz for a summer job.

"I was in Santa Cruz about a week before I knew I was going to stay. This is just a great place to live."

He went back to school, joined the doctoral program in the history of consciousness at UCSC, and eventually became a lecturer of community studies.

**R**OTKIN HAS made a career out of organizing at UCSC. He's sent hundreds of students across the world and back into the Santa Cruz community to volunteer their time in different social service agencies as part of the requirement of their community studies major.

When he first moved to Santa Cruz, he was still struggling with the question: "How do you show people they can make a difference in their lives?"

He found the answer in grass-roots organizing. He started going door to door in his Westside neighborhood, telling people they could get their library reopened, that they could get a health clinic in their neighborhood and eventually becoming the spokesman for the Westside Neighbors organization.

And they were successful.

"Three hundred people showed

up at a City Council meeting, asking to reopen the Garfield Park Library. Kids were holding signs that said, 'Let us read.' They reopened the library at 8 o'clock the next morning."

The first time Rotkin ran for City Council it was part of a "protest campaign" to garner support for a Westside health clinic. Running as a socialist-feminist, Rotkin assumed he had no chance of winning. He was wrong.

In 1982 he was elected to the city council as the first socialist mayor. The neighborhood got its health clinic, and it got a city councilman as well.

**R**OTKIN WORKS 40 hours a week at the university, 40 hours a week at City Hall, sleeps five hours a night and complains that he's gaining weight because he doesn't have time to work out.

He likes to play basketball in his backyard and ride his bicycle through the Santa Cruz mountains.

He split up with his first wife, and remarried seven years ago to Madelyn McCaul, who works in community television. He's never had any children of his own but helped raise three of his partners' children over the years.

He's got a reputation for wearing tennis shoes everywhere he goes and a reputation for attracting controversy — whether it's over a party flier which showed a bunch of protesters trashing a cop car (he apologized for that) or defending a Santa Cruz Action Network director arrested for soliciting a prostitute.

"Sometimes he's a little surprised that things are as controversial as they are," says Weed. "But he doesn't shy away from conflict. He doesn't mind taking it on. He has fun going right into the lions' den."

To his neighbors who know him best, Rotkin is just a "laid back guy," who keeps his lawn mowed and likes to play a little one-on-one basketball.

"There was a revolution," Rotkin says, thinking back over his years in Santa Cruz politics. "I think we made a huge difference. We spend \$2 million a year on social services. Local taxes have gone down. I'm really proud of that. It's what the citizens in this

town wanted.

"If you really get into it, you can make a difference," he says, insisting he has remained idealistic over the years. "You don't have to put up with abuse. Get organized, you can really make a change."