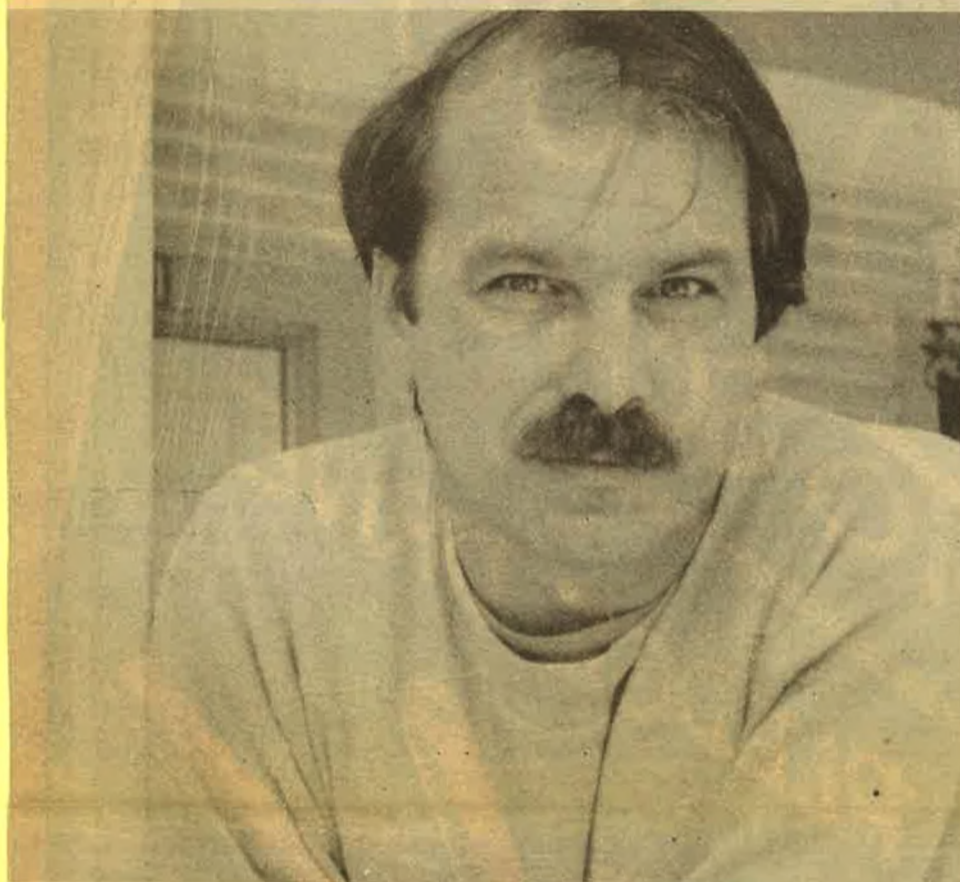


# METROPOLIS

*Lead Copy:* Coyote Creek spill didn't leak into local news media. *Public Eye:* San Jose schemes ex-sanitized downtown. *Grind:* SF papers go easy on hometown pol. Edited by Jonathan Vankin



**Streets:** The serenity of Dennis Scherzer's East Palo Alto home belies the nearness of roving drug peddlers.

## Tough Street

*the South Bay's toughest city, where crack dealers prowl the streets, a former hippie makes one rather loud compromise to protect his family.*

BOB HANSEN

**I**N THE SIDEWALK in front of Dennis Scherzer's Clarke Avenue home, a fierce-looking knot of crack cocaine dealers peddle to a steady stream of cars men by addicts seeking the light rock.

Yet from the pastoral setting of Dennis Scherzer's forested back yard, the mean streets of East Palo Alto seem a million miles away. The outspoken community activist's property looks like a low-rent La Honda, with several tall redwood trees swaying in the cool afternoon breeze and squirrels, butterflies and sparrows flitting from branch to branch. The setting is deceptively peaceful, considering that gun-toting dope pushers lurk nearby. Sitting in the back yard, one half-expects to see Ken Kesey come lumbering out of the house.

A more likely visitor, though, is one of the local

street toughs, since Scherzer's front door is slightly ajar. Is he worried? Nah.

"Yes, someone could walk in off the street," he explains, sipping a fruit drink at a funky old picnic table in the middle of the woodsy yard. "But they don't know where I am, and they *do* know that I've got the 12-gauge. And they know that I'll use it and point it at them and pull the trigger and take their young lives away."

He's got a point there.

On April 23, Scherzer, a one-time San Francisco flower child, shot and wounded a 17-year-old Redwood City youth during a gun fight in his front yard. It was after midnight, and Scherzer was standing in his driveway, a newly purchased shotgun at the ready, when he saw a youth emerge from a party next door and point a semiautomatic pistol at his house. Scherzer cocked the weapon loudly to scare the teenager off. The youth took a few steps away, snarled "I'm gonna kill your ass," and then squeezed off several rounds in Scherzer's direction. One bullet smashed through the front of the house and landed in the white baby grand piano that his 8-year-old daughter uses for practice.

"I saw the muzzle flash and I started blasting back," Scherzer says, recalling the events of that night. "It scared the hell out of me."

It probably scared the assailant, too. Scherzer's shotgun blast ripped into a plum tree, but a chunk of buckshot caught the youth in the leg. He was treated at Stanford University Hospital, and arrested a few days later. In early August he was convicted of attempted murder and firing into an inhabited dwelling. He has been sentenced to five years at the California Youth Authority.

Scherzer loathed having to discharge his weapon—this is a guy who refused to allow his three daughters to play with toy guns. But as he puts it, "[The shotgun is] like a samurai sword. You pull it out, you got to use it."

That Scherzer engaged in a fire-fight on his own property demonstrates how much East Palo Alto has changed since the sometime electric piano player moved from San Francisco to his sprawling, two-story home 17 years ago. East Palo Alto has always been a tough town, but back in the old days Scherzer was at least able to talk to the neighboring hoods.

"Even some of the worst thugs—they're all in prison now—they'd be out on the street armed and raising hell in the middle of the night, but I could go out and talk to them without fear of getting beaten up or something," he says.

Now, though, he tries to avoid even making eye contact with the toughs who gather on his street. The new generation of crack dealers are too loco. "The young ones—they'll want to start something with you just for looking at them," he says. "You just can't talk to them."

**R**AISED IN AKRON, OHIO, Scherzer, 39, moved to East Palo Alto in 1974, after a short stay in San Francisco. At the time, East Palo Alto was unincorporated (it became a city in 1983), and Scherzer got to know the area when he made treks down Highway 101 to jam with musician friends who were staying there. He had dreams of playing music professionally. It was at one of these jam sessions that he met his wife, Marilyn, who was living nearby. They liked the area's multicultural ethnicity and eventually purchased the Clarke Avenue

*Continued on next page*



**Scherzer says weapon-wielding thugs routinely drop by the crack house, and business disputes between dealers and addicts are often settled with exchanges of semiautomatic gunfire. "Just like in the movies," he says.**

*Continued from previous page*

home where they now live. They bought it for less than \$30,000 and were married there soon after moving in.

Jobs were scarce, but Scherzer, who earned a degree in geography from San Jose State, found work through the state's CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) program. He was hired as a coordinator for a 40-acre community garden, which has since sprouted a business park.

He managed to parlay the CETA gig into a small business selling vegetables, but the venture failed after drug addicts stole all of his irrigation pipes a few years back.

His chief form of income now is the money he makes as a board member of the East Palo Alto Sanitary District. He was elected in 1982, when he ran uncontested. During the last reelection campaign, Scherzer faced an opponent he contends had been backed by supporters of East Palo Alto's rent control law. The law is a political hot potato in East Palo Alto and was the driving force behind the city's move to incorporate.

"They came after me and really tried to do me in," he says, noting that he still won the election by a sizable margin.

He's adamantly opposed to rent control. "It has brought more economic ruin to this city than any other single factor," he declares. He contends that the law strips East Palo Alto of badly needed tax dollars, which has caused the city to drastically reduce essential services to its residents.

One of the city's staunchest proponents of rent stabilization is William Webster. He readily admits that rent control supporters tried to prevent Scherzer from retaining his spot on the sanitary district. Webster charges that Scherzer is using the position to gain credibility in the community and to push his own political agenda—which is to overturn the city's rent control law.

Webster contends Scherzer is against the law because it has prevented the Scherzers from making a handsome profit on the sale of their home. "It's the worst thing that ever happened to Dennis Scherzer," he says.

Scherzer has held office longer than any other elected official in

East Palo Alto and is well acquainted with the city's powers-that-be. That didn't do him much good, though, when last winter he lobbied the city council to take action against a crack house on his block. He says weapon-wielding thugs routinely drop by the crack house, and that business disputes between dealers and addicts are often settled with blazing exchanges of semiautomatic gunfire. "Just like in the movies," he says.

After unsuccessfully attempting to convince the council to pass an abatement law that would allow law enforcement to evict people who operate crack houses, he refused to leave the podium and was almost arrested. Word that he was trying to rid Clarke Avenue of drugs filtered back to the crack house, and on the Friday night after he spoke to the council, some-

one fired four shots into his home. A bullet from a 9mm pistol came crashing through the Scherzers' front wall and smashed into a dining room cabinet full of china. The other three landed in his front porch.

"That's when I went out and bought the shotgun," he notes.

Since the incident involving the 17-year-old, things have been fairly quiet. But still, there are the occasional indignities.

Not long ago, "Somebody went over in my children's play area and took a shit and took one of my T-shirts off the clothes line and wiped his ass with it," he recalls, hinting that the guy was lucky Scherzer was inside the house at the time. "If you don't do something, it's going to get worse than that. I've got my wife and three daughters here." ■