

PENINSULA

Social Justice Issues at Heart Of East Palo Alto's Work

Community groups across the U.S. have received his help

ALONG THE EL CAMINO

Bill Workman

Few people were surprised when Omowale Satterwhite was picked recently to help establish a neighborhood improvement program that could bring millions of dollars of foundation money into East Palo Alto.

After all, Satterwhite, 57, has been the Peninsula's premier community organizer since he undertook a campaign 20 years ago that eventually led in 1983 to the incorporation of East Palo Alto as a city, giving its then-predominantly black population a chance to shape its own destiny.

"Omowale brings a genuine passion for social justice to the table," said Mario Paz of the Peninsula Community Foundation.

The foundation and Satterwhite's Community Development Institute in East Palo Alto are now working with student volunteers from Stanford University's Haas Center for Public Service to help develop a six-year plan for improvements in several East Palo Alto neighborhoods.

The plan could lead to a fresh infusion of as much as \$4.5 million from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation into a financially troubled city that faces possible cutbacks in municipal employees to pay its bills, despite the success of new retail development.

From the inception of the improvement initiative, there was little doubt at the foundations that Satterwhite and his 21-year-old institute would play a key role in enlisting the enthusiastic participation of the neighborhoods in sorting out which improvements should be given priority.

"He can be both a soft-spoken listener and, when needed, a powerful, passionate speaker in the tradition of the evangelical revivalist preacher," said Sterling Speirn, who, as the Peninsula Community Foundation's executive director, has counted Satterwhite as a colleague on a number of projects.

Satterwhite's oratorical style and crowd-pleasing energy were much

on display on KQED-TV in February during a Black History Month series, "Local Heroes," that featured a half-dozen African American community leaders from around Northern California.

Over the years, Satterwhite, who has a doctorate in higher education from Stanford University, has given dozens of grassroots groups a hand in becoming nonprofits to deal with what he calls "the twin devils of racism and poverty" in low-income communities, both in his own town and throughout the Bay Area.

The groups Satterwhite has helped range from a women's resource center and a leadership academy that has instructed about 500 black, Latino and Pacific Island teenagers in how municipal government works to a golf instruction program for black youths that was taught at Stanford's campus course and another program that teaches entrepreneurial skills to the young.

"He has shared what he has learned with so many of us," said San Mateo County Supervisor Rose Jacobs-Gibson, a former East Palo Alto city councilwoman. Satterwhite advised her several years ago in applying for nonprofit status for an organization she runs for single women with families.

Often, in their initial stages, nonprofit groups have been lodged for a time at the headquarters of Satterwhite's institute, a 1950s tract house on pothole-dotted Bell Street that has been transformed into comfortable offices, with a carpeted boardroom in the basement that would be the envy of any Silicon Valley start-up.

Many improvements to the building and its manicured grounds have been done by young blacks, male

and female, learning carpentering and landscaping skills under contractors participating in one of the numerous training programs that Satterwhite has encouraged.

In recent years, he said, "it is fair to say that (the institute) has placed more young people in jobs than any other organization in town."

A balding man with an undisciplined white beard, a man whose signature clothing is the dashiki and African print shirts, Satterwhite, a native of Akron, Ohio, moved to East Palo Alto in the late 1960s while working on his doctorate.

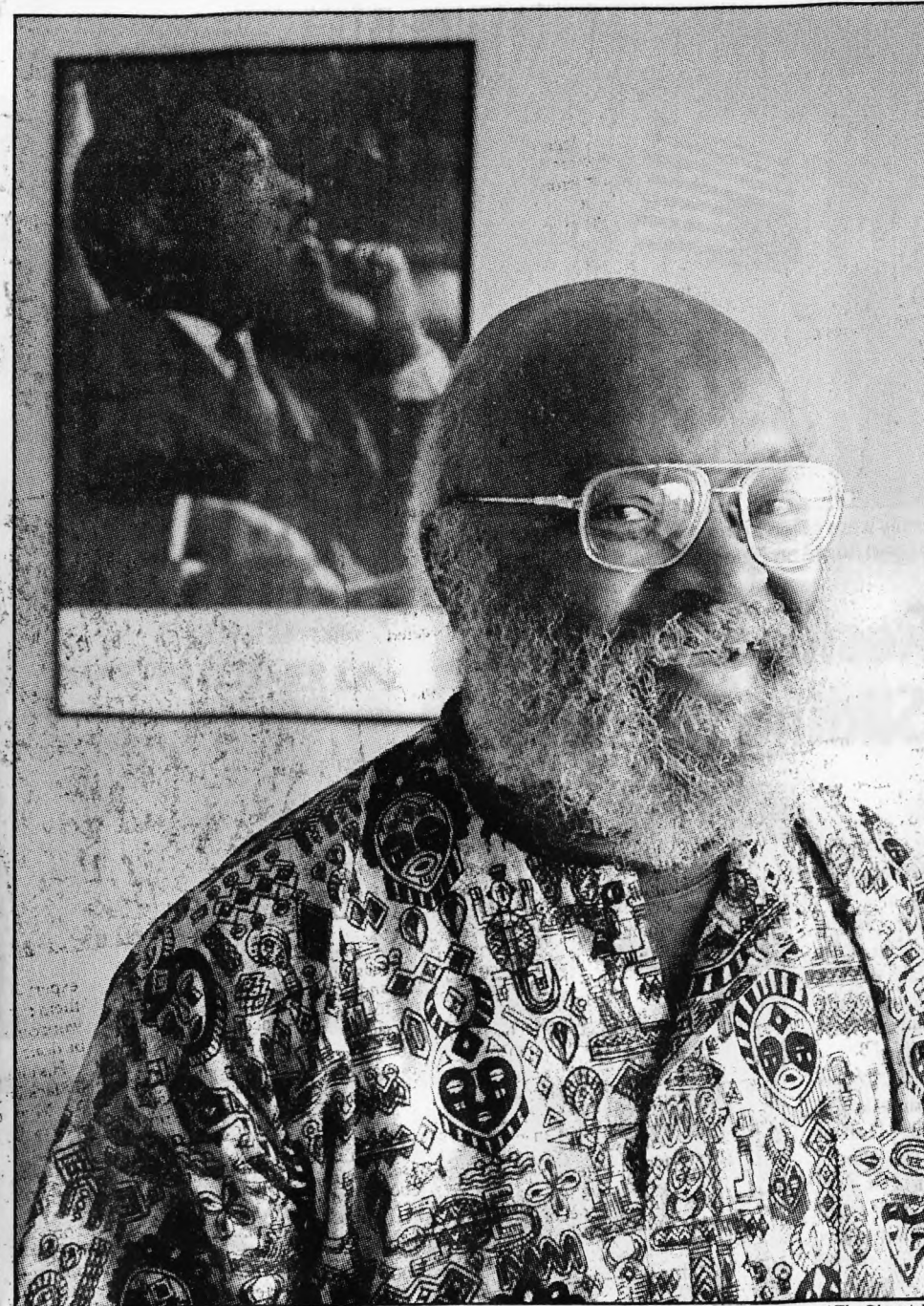
At the time, the black power and African nationalist movements were at their peaks. Satterwhite, a classmate of civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael, later Kwame Ture, in his undergraduate days at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Carmichael had only recently "come out of the box" that had segregated black Americans.

"Before I got to Howard, I thought only white people could be the leaders," he recalled.

At Stanford, Satterwhite led Black Student Union protests against what he said was campus racism, and by the time he finished his doctoral thesis in the mid-1970s, he had been an assistant to the superintendent of the now-defunct Ravenswood School District and was named a member of the San Mateo County Planning Commission.

By 1979, with the help of federal community service funds, he had created his institute and was playing a pivotal role in the movement that led both to self-governance for East Palo Alto and to his election to the new city's first City Council.

While proud of his contribution to incorporation, Satterwhite also has bitter memories of the aftermath of the election, in which incorporation won by only 15 votes and was challenged in the courts by Satterwhite's longtime mentor, Gertrude Wilks, founder of the Nairobi School, and others he had viewed as friends.



KENDRA LUCK / The Chronicle

Omowale Satterwhite, president of the Community Development Institute in East Palo Alto, has been a community activist for more than 20 years.

"It divided this community for at least 10 years," said Satterwhite. He and Wilks have had very little to say to each other since that time, he said.

Over the years, Satterwhite's reputation as a professional mediator and facilitator has spread. He now spends a considerable amount of time consulting for more than 100 community-based and socially conscious organizations across the nation.

"I learned a long time ago that people know what's wrong (with an organization) and what doesn't feel good, so I don't pretend to be the

expert — I just create the space for them to have a conversation and work out for themselves what has to be done."

His clients have included National Black United Fund in Newark, N.J., Milwaukee's Jobs With Peace, El Paso Project Change and the Highlander Education Center in Tennessee, long known for its work with farmers, coal miners and the poor.

Some organizations get the benefit of his skills gratis, but Satterwhite estimated that his annual consulting fees total about \$250,000, most of which is plowed back into the insti-

tute's projects, freeing it from dependency on foundation funds.

"I suppose I could become a millionaire if I quit doing this," Satterwhite said, smiling. "But I'm really a teacher, and the most rewarding thing that happens to a teacher is when the eyes of a child — or a group — light up and they finally get it."

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