

A roof over their heads

After nearly two decades of community work, William Webster spends six to seven days each week assisting East Palo Altans as an advocate for their homes and neighborhoods

Story by Bonnie Eslinger • Daily News Staff Writer

Photos by Kirstina Sangsahachart • Daily News Photographer

As he walks down Euclid Avenue, William Webster points out he has knocked on most of the doors in this East Palo Alto neighborhood — many times, over a couple of decades.

“I’ve been involved in every political campaign since 1989 on to the present day,” he said.

Webster’s not boasting, just stating facts, something he does in every conversation. At 5 feet 6 inches tall, he may be short in stature but he’s long on dates, numbers, events and details.

He has served on the East Palo Alto Rent Stabilization Board the past 19 years and also sits on the boards of Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto and the East Palo Alto Council of Tenants’ Education Fund.

In addition, Webster was a founding member of the East Palo Alto Community Alliance Neighborhood Development Organization, commonly known as EPA CAN DO, which works to maintain affordable housing and promote economic development in the city.

And on top of all that, Webster said he has managed to attend “about 95 percent” of the city council meetings in the past 20 years.

Most recently, he helped campaign for the passage of Measure H, which strengthens the city’s 23-year-old rent control law.

“As I tell people, no matter what other areas of activities you’re involved in, it could be education, it could be mental health, it could be physical health, if you don’t have a roof over your head it’s hard to be functional in any of these other areas,” said Webster, who is quick to smile and eager to help. “In order to have a healthy community, people have to be able to afford to have a habitation.”

Community Legal Services Executive Director Candice Greenberg called Webster “incredibly effective” but also humble and egalitarian.

“We could be sitting around at a table at a board meeting talking about a particular housing issue. Although he’s probably the authority on the issue, he does not speak up, he does not interrupt, he’ll allow 90 percent of the conversation to take place, and might even need to be asked to participate,” she said. “Then he’ll just open up and school the whole table.”

Webster, a 1964 Stanford graduate in German studies, worked as a college professor in different states early in his career and then took a private sector job before returning in 1974 to Palo Alto, where he spent his childhood. Later, he lived in an apartment that became part of East Palo Alto when the city incorporated in 1983.

Since 1992 he has worked at Stanford in the Department of Aeronautics



TOP: East Palo Alto housing advocate William Webster stands in front of an apartment complex under rent control near the corner of Euclid Avenue and O’Connor Street on Friday. **ABOVE:** Webster listens to residents’ concerns during an East Palo Alto Rent Stabilization Board meeting at City Hall on Jan. 18.

and Astronautics, where he now helps with the administrative tasks associated with post-doctoral students.

He doesn’t like to tell people his age, he said.

“If you’re a senior citizen, you get relocated in people’s minds to the nursing home, and I’m not quite ready for that yet,” he said.

A Christian Scientist who reads the Bible daily, he said his activism and

seemingly tireless energy are rooted in his upbringing and faith. His parents were Christian Scientists who raised him to not regard race in dealing with others. His great-grandfather was a conductor on the underground railroad, he notes proudly.

Although always socially conscious, Webster became a local activist in 1988 when a friend invited him to a community meeting called in response to

EDITOR’S NOTE

Several months ago, we asked you to let us know who among you are unsung heroes — the people whose deeds quietly touch others’ lives in positive ways yet seldom get the recognition they deserve. Thanks to your responses, we are featuring these special people once a month in this section.

a threat to the city’s rent control ordinance.

Marjorie Wallace was that friend, and the person who nominated Webster as an “unsung hero.” She admires his ability to hang in when the going gets tough.

“He’s very patient,” she said. “Some things try your patience, because some people are so stubborn. He does get irritated, but he doesn’t get aggressive.”

Never married, and without kids, Webster said he spends about six to seven days a week on some form of community work. When asked if he has ever felt burned out, he shakes his head.

“I often describe myself as a floating cinder,” he said. “I’ve burned up many times over, but I haven’t given up.”

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