



Times Tribune photo by Victor J. Volta

East Palo Alto community services director Robert Hoover back home in East Palo Alto, in front of the city's Bell Street Recreation Center.

Hoover's East Palo Alto job is new but he knows the territory

By Roy Hurlbert
Times Tribune staff

East Palo Alto's new community services director, Robert Steven Hoover, began his chores a few weeks ago with a running start — for he's no stranger in the fledgling municipality.

Hoover, back on the Peninsula after seven years of community college administrative duty (two in Chicago and then five in Jacksonville, Fla.), had spurred East Palo Alto's self-determination struggle for more than a decade.

Hoover initially made headlines locally in directing College of San Mateo's first Readiness Program, which sent hundreds of county minority students into the community college for the first time. Despite the tutorial program's success,

Hoover lost that post after two years of increased friction with the administration over control of the curriculum and funding. A campus riot and sit-in that enraged the administration led to Hoover's reassignment — and eventually his angry resignation. He declared before he quit in disgust: "I got a zero job without power."

Hoover rebounded from that setback by teaming up with Gertrude Wilks, now a city councilwoman, to establish a private, alternative school system — the Nairobi schools, elementary through college in scope. During that same period he pushed hard for curriculum reforms and more parental involvement as a Ravenswood City School District trustee, serving three times as board chairman and eight years in all.

Adamantly opposed to the closure of Ravenswood High School in East Palo Alto, Hoover and several other community activists — including many whites — lambasted the scattering of the community's youngsters to Caucasian-dominated schools. They stressed the lack of special programs for these bussed students and insisted that integration without genuine equal opportunity represents no progress at all.

Hoover, a Penn State graduate and the son of a North Carolina brick mason, believes the Nairobi schools format achieved success. But he declared that he was still frustrated when he ended his long duty as a Ravenswood trustee in 1975. He said that despite vigorous

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proposals for instructional changes, the majority of students in the low-wealth district were still being denied a first-class education and that very few of them made the jump into the highest professions.

Today, Hoover says he thinks the situation hasn't improved much, "although the rhetoric is tamer."

He also shares the gloom of many blacks over Ronald Reagan's re-election.

Says Hoover:

"The Ravenswood district has made some strides — but still has serious financial difficulties. As for the high schools, well, the dropout rate for blacks is still high. And recent cuts in counseling services hurt our kids the most."

Hoover first came to the Peninsula in 1959 and soon became an aggressive voice for minority rights and self-determination. He once hailed Stokely Carmichael's brand of stridency against racial injustices and was impatient about less polite forms of agitation. Today he thinks Jesse Jackson has provided blacks with more hope and inspiration than any other black politician.

Hoover left East Palo Alto in 1975 to seek a doctorate in education at Claremont College. He said then his goal was to become principal of a black community school "and turn it into a first-rate school."

But Hoover's doctoral objective went up in smoke. "I did all the work for my dissertation," he recalls, "but my papers were lost in a fire. I simply decided not to go through the whole process again."

Instead, Hoover and his wife, Mary, who has a doctorate in linguistics, moved to new jobs at Olive Harvey Community College, an inner-city school in Chicago, where he served as dean of students. Hoover's broad experience in championing minority education reforms enhanced his employment options. Three years later, the Hoovers moved to much less congested yet uncomfortably more conservative Jacksonville, where he helped — again as a dean — to put Edward Waters College, an all-black, church-affiliated liberal arts school, back on its feet financially.

But Hoover's eventual return to East Palo Alto was a foregone conclusion. "I always said we would be back. In fact, we never sold our house here," he said.

East Palo Alto's incorporation 16 months ago by a narrow margin after a prolonged, bitter debate over its financial stability was the main reason Hoover decided to come "home." He was a natural choice for City Manager Fred Howell, Mayor Barbara Mouton, former ally Wilks, and their colleagues. Each of them respects Hoover's know-how and integrity as a grass-roots school-and-community organizer.

So what's ahead?

"With cityhood status, many of the things we have been advocating here for many years now are do-

able," Hoover enthuses. "There's no reason we can't succeed. Our biggest problem has been financial — a small tax base and heavy unemployment. But with a municipal image, redevelopment bonding and investment by Silicon Valley, San Mateo County and East Bay companies in industry-suited land long available here, we can make it."

Hoover's immediate emphasis as community service director is prescribing recreational, cultural and youth programs on a shared-facilities basis with the schools and other community agencies. He hopes to upgrade the city's strained, poorly equipped recreational facilities. One major target is a fund-raising thrust for the purchase of the Ravenswood High School site from the Sequoia Union High School District. The price tag is \$1.8 million — and if the campaign succeeds, Hoover says the renovated site will become a beehive of wholesome community activity.

Hoover says that in his community services buildup plan he hopes to enlist the skills of many former Ravenswood and Nairobi students "who have become outstanding professionals."

The trouble is, he insists, that there should be many, many more like them — "if they are given the opportunity."

Hoover's two children, Jeanne, 20, and Robert Jr., 18, are students now at prestigious Howard University in Washington, D.C. His wife is chairman of the black studies department at Long Beach State University. It's a long commute for both.