



## Vince L. Harper

December 23, 1965 - November 30, 2021

Vince Harper, a longtime employee of a Santa Rosa nonprofit who dedicated his life to uplifting local at-risk youth and improving the lives of the community around him, has died at age 55.

The news was shared Tuesday afternoon via the Community Action Partnership of Sonoma County, where Harper has worked for the past three decades, most recently as the nonprofit's community engagement director.

Many who knew Harper said he embodied the nonprofit's mission, which aims to build economic and social stability for low-income families and advocate for social and economic justice.

He took the mission a step further by inspiring those he worked with to get involved in the community they lived in, said Susan Cooper, the nonprofit's executive director.

"It was community members who learned from him about giving back to the community," Cooper said. "I think that was a precious gift."

For Laura Arreguin, a Healdsburg resident who previously worked with Harper for a decade on the nonprofit's parent support group Padres Unidos, Harper's genuine commitment to the families and youth he worked with was his biggest

strength, she said.

The two specifically worked with teens of parents who participated in the program, she said.

“He was a person who worked from the heart,” Arreguin said. “He gave his life to his job and to the people that he would come in contact with, especially the youth. He had a big heart for youth and families in need and was always very respectful.”

Though the exact cause and date of his death was not immediately available, several people who knew Harper said he faced ongoing health issues in the months leading up to his death.

Some of those issues were chronicled on his personal Facebook page, which included posts about a recent leg amputation.

Information about Harper’s health could not be confirmed with his sister, who did not respond to a request for an interview Wednesday. Cooper declined to comment on Harper’s health issues, citing employee confidentiality.

Harper’s passing was a shock to many who knew him, including Sonoma County Board of Supervisors Chair Lynda Hopkins, who said some in the community believed Harper was on the road to recovery. Hopkins first met Harper during her initial run for a seat on the county board in 2016, when Harper was leading community meetings in the Moorland neighborhood located southwest of Santa Rosa.

She reconnected with Harper again through the Community Building Initiative group Harper ran out of Roseland, which was designed to empower the area’s residents to improve the conditions of their neighborhood and engage with

local leaders about the community's needs.

"I really think community defined Vince Harper," Hopkins said. "It was his mission in life, his passion and his vocation. He made such an impression with each community in Sonoma County that he touched."

Earlier this year, Windsor Councilwoman Esther Lemus helped raise funds to cover some of the cost of Harper's medical expenses, though she declined to speak about the nature of his health issues, citing a desire to respect Harper and his family's privacy, she said.

The two first met around the time she began working for the Sonoma County District Attorney's Office in 2007. Harper would invite her to speak to parents in the Padres Unidos program about issues ranging from domestic violence to the juvenile justice system and cybercrimes.

"Vince was there to serve and to give to the community, and uplift and transform it for the better," Lemus said. "His passing is such a huge loss. I'm absolutely saddened."

Harper first landed in Sonoma County in 1986 to attend Sonoma State University, where he graduated with a bachelor's degree in management, according to the Community Action Partnership website.

He came by way of the central California town of Atwater, where he attended high school and junior college, a post on the City of Santa Rosa website said.

He got his first taste of working with youth as a volunteer at the South Park Youth Center in 1991 and was hired by Community Action Partnership of Sonoma County, which ran the center, a year later, according to the nonprofit.

It was there that Harper created a “safe haven” for kids in the South Park neighborhood who attended the after-school hub, said Argentina Martinez, a 35-year-old Santa Rosa resident who first attended the center with her older siblings about 25 years ago.

Harper then created a youth leadership program, which exposed local teens to volunteer opportunities in their community, said Martinez. She participated in the program for about two years until she left for Mexico at 14, Martinez said.

“That’s what we gained from him,” Martinez said. “It was selflessness, it was making a difference, making an impact in our community and changing it.”

Harper’s work also made an impact on the Roseland community, where he ran the Roseland Community Building Initiative for several years starting in 2015, said Nohemi Palomino, a longtime member of the group.

The weekly meetings were mostly attended by mothers who lived in the Roseland neighborhood and were interested in improving the conditions of the area, Palomino said.

Though the nonprofit no longer runs the program, Palomino said that she and other community members who were part of the group have kept it running informally.

“He was taking us to officials ... to find out how the city and county works, so we knew what the resources were in the community and so we could share that information with our neighbors,” Palomino said. “He made it so we were a bridge to the community.”

One of Harper's more recent contributions to the community was his involvement in the nonprofit's Community Conversations on Race, a virtual video series that began about a year and a half ago in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer.

Harper, a Black man, shared his candid perspective of someone exploring the issues raised after Floyd's death in the series' first livestream. He also helped the nonprofit develop ideas for future conversation topics and guest speakers, said Katie Watts-Whitaker, the nonprofit's marketing and communications manager.

"He and I had a lot of conversations about race and what needs to be discussed, and who he thinks we should have speak," she said. "He had so many connections in the community because so many people trusted him."

Community Action Partnership plans to hold a memorial to celebrate Harper's life, though details were not immediately available as of Wednesday, Cooper said.

While both Cooper and Watts-Whitaker emphasized Harper's dedication to his work in the community, they also reflected on the other aspects of his life that brought him joy. Those included long bicycle rides and photography, as well as music, they said.

Santa Rosa Mayor Chris Rogers, who got to know Harper in 2012 when the two were part of the city's Community Advisory Board, said the Santa Rosa City Council ended their meeting on Tuesday in Harper's memory after learning of his death.

Harper's lasting impact on the community will be his work with local at-risk youth and other families in need, Rogers said.

“It’s just an incredible legacy of investing in people,” Rogers said. “He was always very dedicated and passionate, and he just cared.”

NASHELLY CHAVEZ-THE PRESS DEMOCRAT-Published on December 1,  
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# Previous Events

## Celebration of Life

DEC 16. 3:00 PM - 7:00 PM (PT)

Finely Center Auditorium  
2060 W. College Avenue  
Santa Rosa, CA 95401

# Tribute Wall



“ Windsor Healdsburg Mortuary & Crematory created a Join us live at 3:00pm to celebrate Vince in memory of Vince L. Harper



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**Windsor Healdsburg Mortuary & Crematory** - December 15, 2021 at 04:24 PM