

# Snyder Opened Doors for the Homeless

By Peter Dreier

**M**ITCH SNYDER, the nation's leading advocate for the homeless, died while Congress was debating a housing bill that, by any standard, is inadequate to solve the problem that he spent over a decade battling. The same day, the Bush administration decided against waging any major anti-poverty effort, despite a widening gap between rich and poor.

Mitch Snyder deserves much of the credit for awakening the country to the problems of poverty, hunger and homelessness in the last decade. Polls now show that most Americans are willing to pay higher taxes if they know the funds will be used to address these people's needs.

He used controversial tactics — hunger strikes, mass marches, sit-ins and civil disobedience — to wage war against homelessness. Many public officials, and even some shelter operators and other homeless advocates, criticized Mitch's methods. Yet, without his singleminded toughness, the issue might not be on the national agenda at all. His confrontational style attracted public attention, forced government officials to stop ignoring the plight of the homeless and stirred millions of Americans to work on behalf of the poor.

Mitch Snyder was a radical. He realized that the radicalism of one generation is often the common sense of the next generation. Mitch was in the tradition of the union leaders who, back in the 1870s, called for the 8-hour day; the suffragettes who insisted that women have the right to vote; the civil rights organizers who demanded federal action to remove unfair barriers to blacks, and the senior citizens who fought for what they once called "old age insurance" — Social Security.

At one time, most Americans considered such people and their ideas "un-American" and even socialistic. But today those achievements are part of the American mainstream, and we are proud of them. The lives of Americans have been greatly improved precisely because our nation's leaders did hear their protests and enacted laws to broaden democracy and economic justice.

Mitch symbolized the contradictions of the 1980s. He abandoned a life as a Madison Avenue

advertising man to live and work with the poor. He lived simply in the 1,000-bed shelter he helped organize, but he also knew how to raise money for his cause among the Hollywood elite. To stir the nation's conscience, he disrupted business as usual with confrontational tactics, but he also knew how to lobby effectively in the corridors of power.

He risked his own life with hunger strikes and sleep-ins on cold grates in Washington, D.C., but in doing so he became a media celebrity, attracting sufficient publicity to mobilize citizens and lawmakers to acknowledge the needs of the homeless.

Like Mitch himself, the 1980s were full of paradoxes. The contrast of homeless Americans living in the shadow of luxury condos epitomized the decade. It was a period of outrageous greed — and outrageous suffering. The media brought us "lifestyles of the rich and famous" side by side with cover stories about homeless families. And while the 1980s were often referred to as the "me decade," more Americans were involved in social issues — as volunteers and activists — than at any time in recent memory.

The decade witnessed a great deal of grass-roots protest: the massive Solidarity March for workers' rights on Labor Day, 1981; more than a million people at a rally for an end to the arms race a few years later; millions of Americans at a protest for abortion rights in mid-decade; and last October — at Snyder's initiative — more than 200,000 people in Washington to demand Housing Now.

Mitch was part of, and helped organize, a growing housing activist movement that emerged during the past decade. It includes shelters and soup kitchens, tenants' rights groups, community-based developers who build and rehabilitate low-cost housing, neighborhood associations fighting gentrification, and community organizations opposing bank red-lining in low-income areas. Those groups spent much of the 1980s working — mostly on the local level — to plug some of the gaps left by the federal government's withdrawal from housing programs.

Mitch's genius was to help galvanize these fledgling grass-roots groups into a national political force — and to force millions of Americans to pay



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attention to homelessness. Mitch knew that the housing crisis was not a problem among the poor alone, and he worked hard to build alliances with church groups, labor unions, mayors and others with mainstream constituencies.

He also realized that you can't fight a war on homelessness and poverty with an all-volunteer army. Mitch frequently said that more and better soup kitchens and shelters were not the solution. What was needed was a renewed commitment by the federal government to build affordable housing.

Three years ago, he traveled across the country gathering grass-roots support for federal legislation to help the homeless. What emerged — after sit-ins, hunger strikes and many meetings with congressional leaders — was the Stewart B. McKinney Act, named after the late Republican congressman from Connecticut who had worked with Snyder on homelessness problems. In the last three years, McKinney Act funds have helped community-based nonprofit groups serve thousands of the most needy.

But Mitch was the first to say that the \$400 billion-a-year McKinney program barely scratched the surface. The goal of last October's Housing Now march, and of Mitch's effort until his death, was to pressure the Bush administration and Congress to give more than lip service and token funding to meet the nation's growing housing crisis. He was frustrated that the major housing bills now pending in Congress call for only minor increases in current spending levels. The proposals sponsored by the Bush administration and by the Democratic leadership do not even match the level of housing assistance of the pre-Reagan years.

At the time of his death, Mitch was working to pressure Congress to pass a much more progressive bill — the Mickey Leland Housing Assistance Act — which would authorize \$125 billion over five years for low-income housing programs. This legislation, drafted in response to the Housing Now march and named after the late Texas congressman, would spend taxpayers' dollars in the most cost-effective ways: giving the poor housing vouchers; providing nonprofit groups with funds to build low-income housing and purchase and preserve existing subsidized housing; and setting aside funds to develop rooming houses for the poor.

It is a sad irony that Mitch died just as the world was emerging from the Cold War, a time when the "peace dividend" may make it possible to address long-neglected problems of poverty. Yet there are still powerful interests who would maintain the military-industrial complex or target any cutbacks to bail out the corrupt savings and loans.

Let Mitch's legacy, instead, be our renewed dedication to reordering our nation's priorities, solving the problems of economic and social injustice and investing our nation's wealth in decent housing, health care and education.

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## GRAPHIC OPINION



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