

Community mourns death of longtime advocate Duane Chapman

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Duane Chapman/Facebook

Duane Chapman, a longtime community advocate and lifelong Richmond resident, died on Tuesday, Oct. 30, after a long illness.

The news of Chapman's passing led to an outpouring of tributes from city leaders, including Richmond police Chief Allwyn Brown. He was well known in the community, particularly after two decades of volunteering in various city functions, including RPD programs.

Early in his career, Chapman worked as a police volunteer at the Iron Triangle substation, Chief Brown wrote in a tribute to Chapman on Facebook Thursday. More recently, Chapman was "a fixture with our Crime Prevention team, working hand-in-hand with Manager Michelle Milam and Specialist Mandy Swirsding." Chapman previously worked as a nurse and a homeless outreach specialist for Contra Costa County, Brown said.

Milam called Chapman a "good friend and loving father" who loved his community.

"I had the privilege of working with him closely as he volunteered for the Richmond Police Department working on foster care and mental health every day for 30 hours a week even when he was being treated for cancer," Milam said.

Chapman's niece called her uncle a "selfless fighter" who "fought for those that couldn't help themselves." The sentiment was echoed by Richmond City Councilman Jael Myrick, who called Chapman "one of the purest spirits one could meet in a community like Richmond."

"He was always about serving others and making the community better," Myrick said in a Facebook post. "You never heard his name mixed up in drama, you always heard his name in pushing for something positive and important."

Chapman was the Chair of the Human Relations Commission for many years. According to Chief Brown, he served on the COR Crime Prevention Executive Board of Directors; was the former Chair of the Contra Costa County Mental Health Commission and played an active role with both the Richmond Police Activities League Youth Scholarship program and Road to the Future Foster Care Youth Conference. He also "helped a past RPD social media campaign highlighting 'a day in the life of a police officer' designed to raise public insight on the realities of police work in Richmond," Brown said.

Chapman was a fixture at the city's Juneteenth Festival, as well. In recent years, he co-founded Richmond Rainbow Pride, an LGBTQ advocacy group, alongside Cesar Zepeda, a community advocate and council candidate. Zepeda called Chapman a "beautiful human being."

"Duane always had a smile to cheer you up, a hug to comfort you, and a shoulder to cry on," Zepeda said.

Robert Rogers, district coordinator for Contra Costa Supervisor John Gioia's Office, said Chapman remained committed to community advocacy even as he battled with his illness.

"...Even though he was confined to his bed and in terrible pain, he still mustered the energy to tell me about the plight of the homeless in our communities, and how he was fortunate to have a roof," Rogers said.

Rogers quoted a 2001 San Francisco Chronicle profile that stated Chapman "probably knows more about the mentally ill homeless than anyone at the county Health Service Department." In the article, he was described as a "street-smart miracle worker who knows how to approach and engage the homeless."

Chapman died surrounded by loved ones.

"Please join me in honoring and appreciating Duane's many helpful contributions intended for the betterment of all Richmonders, as well as the countless volunteer hours donated to assist RPD initiatives over two decades," Chief Brown said.

Mike Aldax