

# 'Heroes' Lauded for Human Rights Work

By ERIN GALLAGHER  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Berkeley's vice mayor and a prominent community activist were honored Wednesday as Bay Area heroes for their passion for human rights.

At the second annual Bertram Gross Awards, the Campaign to Abolish Poverty/Full Employment Coalition recognized Vice Mayor Maudelle Shirek and Amaha Kassa as especially dedicated activists. The award, which honors local advocates of the living wage, is a tribute to Bertram Gross, father of the living wage movement.

"Berkeley is one of the few places to link international human rights to local human policy and that reflects (Bert's) legacy," said Charles Henry, chair of the African American studies department at UC Berkeley.

Gross' political career has inspired activists all over the world to fight for a living wage, said activist Ying Lee at the event. Currently, however, only 47 cities in the United States have a living wage. Living wage campaigns aim to raise the minimum wage so that workers can live above the poverty line.

Gross spent his lifetime working for full employment at a living wage. During the course of his career, Gross authored the nation's three major employment bills — the Roosevelt Full Employment Act, the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment and Balance Growth Act and another bill, still pending approval, which will implement a higher wage.

Kusum Gross-Singh, Gross' widow, along with Henry,

attended the celebration to present the awards.

"These people are models of the community," said Ying Lee, an activist who led the event. "We want to recognize them and thank them."

Shirek was recognized for her efforts in the fight for economic justice. Shirek's commitment to the cause has earned her acclaim as the "conscience of East Bay politics." Shirek has served on the Berkeley City Council since 1984, working on such issues as affordable housing and health care for women, children and AIDS patients.

"I hope to keep (Gross') spirit alive for a long time," Shirek said.

The second Berkeley activist honored was Amaha Kassa, who has worked for the East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy during the past year.

Currently, the organization is working with the Radisson Hotel Berkeley Marina employees, who have been fighting for higher wages for over a year.

Kassa attended the City Council meeting last Tuesday, as he has countless times before, to protest the low wages of local workers.

As part of his speech, Kassa announced that on Tuesday Berkeley expanded its living wage to the Berkeley Marina, making Berkeley the first city to adopt a geographical living wage.

Now the work will be to watch what Berkeley Marina employers actually do, to make sure that they uphold the law, Kassa said.

"I urge and challenge you to push even harder," Kassa said. "I'll see you at the struggle."