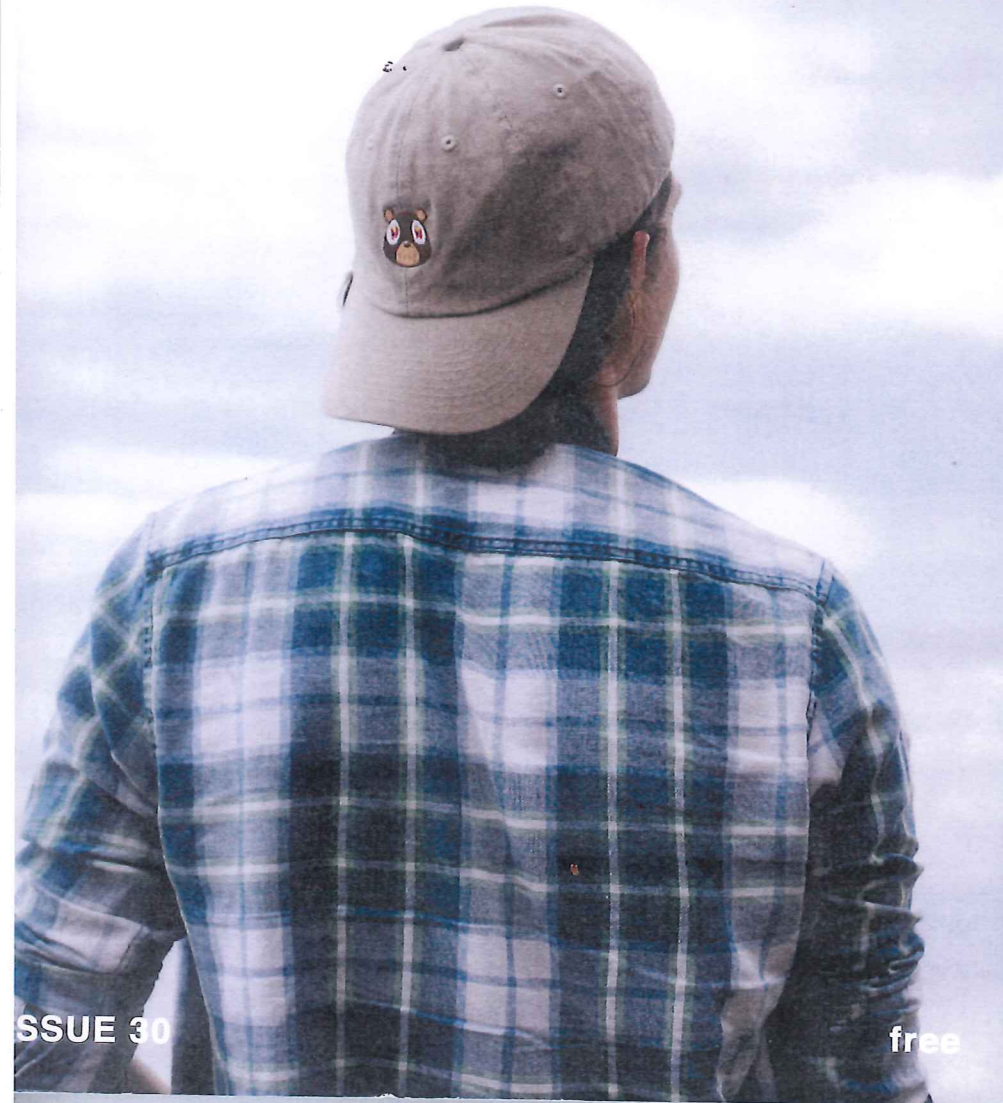


# WORD

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## A look inside the life of Father Jon-Stephen Hedges

Life in Isla Vista is often associated with impermanence; the lives of thousands pass through these streets year after year, with few leaving anything more than some empty beer bottles and blurred out memories behind.

Though this description fits the overwhelming majority of residents, some permanent outliers exist in the midst of those just passing through. I happened to stumble upon one such case after moving to the 68 block of Pasado for my final year at UCSB.

I met Father Jon-Stephen Hedges on a warm summer night in July after his wife, Melissa, had called my housemates and I over to discuss our recent noise issues (which was, after all, completely warranted). We expected to be lectured and scolded, but the reaction we got instead took us completely by surprise.

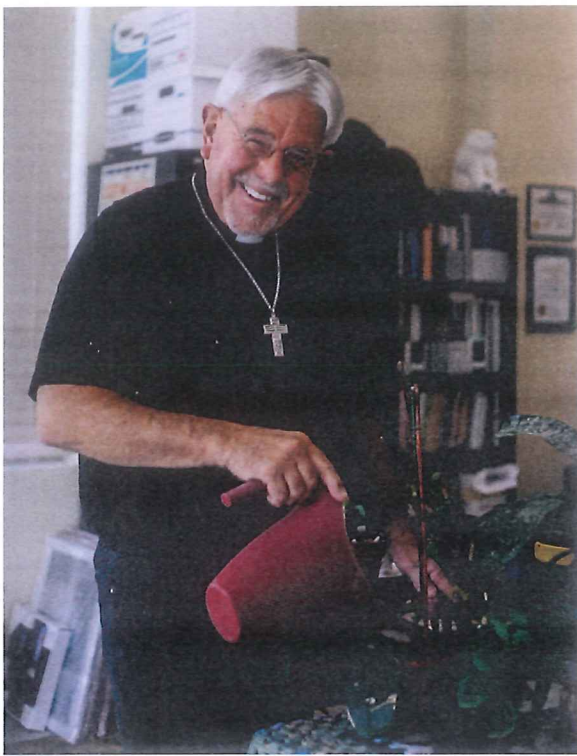
Reaching their house, we were greeted by a boisterous black labrador, followed by the kind-hearted Melissa Hedges. She warmly introduced herself and led us into her and Father Jon's home, quaintly decorated with religious artifacts and family photos.

Father Jon was seated on the couch and stood to introduce himself to us. His attire was all black, save for a single strip of white cloth around his neck that proclaimed his profession. I will admit, I was briefly upset in realizing our Isla Vista neighbor was a man of the cloth. Despite a momentary fear of a party-less senior year ahead, I was quickly brought back into the conversation noticing how the atmosphere of their home held an indisputable sense of welcome and ease.

words // Araceli Benitez  
photos // Marcos Reynoso  
design // Ateken Abia

# MOVER SHAKER PASTOR PREACHER





*MY WORK  
IS AS  
COMPLICATED  
AS THIS  
WALL...  
SCATTERED  
AND CRAZY,  
BUT IT  
EMBODIES MY  
HISTORY, MY  
INFLUENCES...  
EVERY  
IMPORTANT  
PERSON IN MY  
LIFE.*

**Father John Hedges nurtures plants and community.**

After a quick exchange of apologies, phone numbers, and promises to be more respectful, the conversation shifted to Hedges' intriguing storytelling and we were immersed in the highs and lows of his life experience, most of which occurred in and around Isla Vista.

His essential role in the community began in 1968, after graduating with a BA in Cultural Anthropology from UCSB and a Master's in Orthodox Theology from St. Athanasius Academy. He recounted that he became a Christian during this time as a result of the era's political tumult and social upheaval.

After witnessing the unique, yet troubled world of Isla Vista firsthand, his decision to remain here stemmed

from his desire to play an active role in improving the conditions of this one-square-mile anomaly, primarily with respect to the lives of those who reside in it.

The daunting task forced Hedges to learn how to wear many hats. Some of his present roles in the community include: Campus and Community Pastor; volunteer Chaplain with the Santa Barbara County Sherriff's Department, Certified Trauma Responder, and Board Certified Crisis Chaplain with the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress.

He is regularly deployed by disaster and trauma agencies to assist survivors of major tragedies. Some of his most notable experiences involve caring for Hurricane Katrina survivors



as a Disaster Mental Health worker and being one of the first responders at the scene of the Isla Vista shootings in May 2013.

Earlier this year, Father Jon was brutally attacked in his own home by a UCSB student on allegedly bad LSD. The man showed up on Father Jon's doorstep, naked from the waist down and crying for help at 2:15am on May 7, 2016. Instinctively, Hedges rushed to aid the disgruntled student, who then pummeled his way through the door and began physically attacking the pastor.

The student—who had spent nearly four years in the military before attending UCSB and was therefore highly skilled in combat—struck Father Jon more than 30 times in the face. Remarkably, Father John managed to escape the incident without any lethal injuries.

This incident was of unique significance to him due to its complete spontaneity and by sheer chance. The trauma he faced following the attack has been one of his primary

influencers in working towards the betterment and increased safety of Isla Vista.

When asked if he would be staying in Isla Vista after experiencing such a traumatic and unfortunate incident, Hedges insisted his place in this town was nowhere near through.

"I am not done here...I am going to stay," said Hedges. "I am working to make this place better, and it starts with being an active participant, not just a passer-through."

The incident inspired him to run for the temporary two-year board seat under the Isla Vista Community Services District measure. "Measures E and F give us a chance to have a part in it all...this is important because if we have a voice in Isla Vista, then we can have more ownership over the policies in place here," stated Hedges.

Father Jon continued to describe that with greater self-governance, Isla Vista could implement stronger policies to protect the houseless of IV, one of his greatest passions.



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THESE EVENTS HERE  
CONNECT NOT JUST TO  
UCSB STUDENTS, BUT TO  
THE WHOLE COMMUNITY  
AS WELL...THERE ARE  
FAMILIES HERE, HIGH  
SCHOOL STUDENTS,  
CHILDREN.

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He played a vital role in the development of Pescadero Lofts, a housing center for Isla Vista's homeless. He currently works on-site with the residents, helping them with everything from how to use cell-phones and send emails, to where to go for specific support services.

The building currently houses 35 formerly homeless residents, and according to the Central Coast Collaborative on Homelessness, the number of homeless people in Isla Vista has decreased from 32 people living on the streets to 19, all in the span of two years.

Visiting Pescadero Lofts with Father Jon, I witnessed a place that embodied hope for those previously hopeless. A wall that lines Hedges' desk is covered in an almost-dizzying array of photos with family and friends amidst memorabilia with personal notes.

"My work is as complicated as this wall...scattered and crazy," said Hedges, "but it embodies my history, my influences...every important person in my life."

He gazed at the many pieces of the wall, seemingly looking past them as if he were watching the memories they symbolized play out on a movie screen behind them. I was immediately aware of how this room represented

a major piece of who he is and how he got to where he currently stands: a person who has touched and improved the lives of so many. Being with someone who reflects such a genuine selflessness forces you to recognize how rare it is to encounter a person of this caliber in the world, let alone in a town as small and unexpected as Isla Vista.

Father Jon's experience as a permanent resident of Isla Vista is one that warrants acknowledgement. Throughout his many interactions with the worst events this town has seen, he continues to stand for the message that by actively engaging within the community, we can offer a sense of hope and change for the future generations to come.

"These events here connect not just to UCSB students, but to the whole community as well...there are families here, high school students, children," stated Hedges.

"We can't wring our hands or point our fingers," he said in a past interview with NPR, "but we've got to figure out a way to do better..This is home. [These events] may break my heart, but it doesn't take away my will to stay for my town."

If we can learn anything from Father Jon, it's this: take care of this beautiful place during your time here, and if you can, go out of your way to do something that will positively impact its future and longevity.

As students, we may consider this our home, even if we are simply guests in this collegiate paradise. Cherish and protect it while you're here and able, but do take time to pay your respects to those permanent neighbors who have seen it all. These people choose to stay and fight for your welfare and safety as temporary, yet integral, parts of this community. 