

Legend and friend passes away

Using hands and heart, Dutch pulled people off the streets and into beds

By CHRISTINE CLARRIDGE
Seattle Times staff reporter

Attorney Mike Duggan first met Dutch Shisler — best known as the man who literally picked drunken people up out of the gutter — as a client. As the driver of King County's first detoxification van, Dutch got into an accident while rushing an inebriated man to Harborview Medical Center.

"I asked him what happened, and he said, 'I think it was my fault. How's the other guy?'" said Duggan, a prosecutor for the county. "I didn't know who he was, but I was blown away by his candor and his honesty."

Years later, when Duggan was facing his own crisis with alcohol, he remembered Dutch and sought him out.

"He offered so much hope," said Duggan. "I was willing to try and do something that is almost unimaginable because he believed in me."

Dutch — as he was called by everyone from the mayor to the homeless — died Monday of liver disease that began in his drinking days nearly 40 years ago. He was 69.

For nearly 30 years, he drove the detox van that took "drunks," as he called them, from the streets to warm beds at treatment centers, shelters and hospitals.

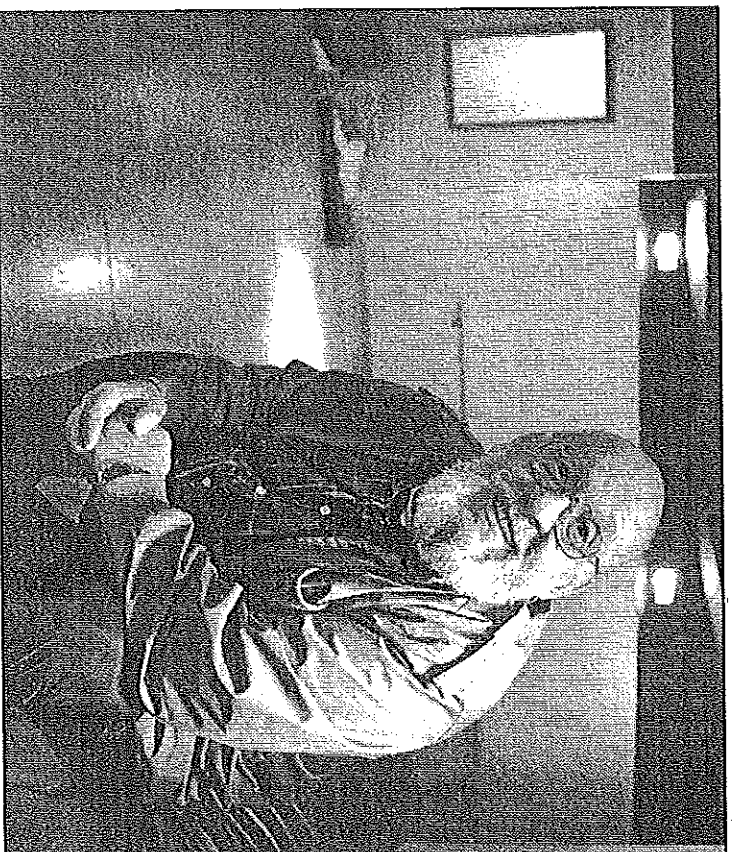
A shelter was named for him where people could get a warm bed for the night without having to commit themselves to alcohol treatment. The Harbor House Dutch Shisler Center opened in 1998 and provided 80 beds for the homeless, the lost and the addicted.

But he ministered not only to those whose illness had led them to the streets but also to alcoholics in boardrooms and stockrooms and courtrooms.

"He didn't give up on anybody," said friend Dan Goforth.

Dutch was born July 23, 1931, in Glendale, Calif. His father died when he was 1, and his mother, who supported Dutch and her two older children by working as a waitress and a taxi driver, remarried several times, according to his widow, Janice Rudnitski.

"They treated Dutch as an accompa-



JIMI LOTT / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Dutch Shisler, who drove the county's first detoxification van, sits in a sobering room at what he called 'My Detox.'

niment or worse," she said.

By the time he was 8, he drank to get drunk, and when he was 13, he ran away and joined the Army.

His mother tracked him down and took him out, but he ran away again and rejoined the military. This time, however, he bribed someone with a bottle of wine to sign the military's parental-consent forms and lied about his age.

When he got out a couple years later, he criss-crossed the U.S. on trains, planes and buses. He lived in New York, Florida, Arizona and Pennsylvania, where he changed his name from Harvey to Dutch. Every place he moved he tried to get a new start. He checked himself into treatment centers again and again. He tried to quit drinking himself, but he couldn't stop.

When he was 32 and living in California he was diagnosed with chronic liver disease, and a shunt was permanently implanted to divert blood from his failing liver.

A few years later he found himself on a plane to Seattle.

"It was Election Day — Sept. 15, 1970," said his widow. "In those days they never sold liquor on Election Day, and so he landed and couldn't get any alcohol. He got through that day and

"I asked him what happened, and he said, 'I think it was my fault. How's the other guy?' I didn't know who he was, but I was blown away by his candor and his honesty."

MIKE DUGGAN

County prosecutor

then thought, 'I got through one day; I can get through the next.'"

He started attending a 12-step program and before long felt compelled to do something for people who suffered like he had.

"He was extremely grateful," said Patrick Vanzo, who worked with Dutch at the county's Department of Community and Human Services. "He felt he had been given a gift and he had to use it."

"Boy, it sounds corny, but he epitomized love in action. We talk about people who have an effect on us by saying he touched me. Well, Dutch

'We talk about people who have an effect on us by saying he touched me. Well, Dutch quite literally touched people and lifted them out of the gutter.'

PATRICK VANZO

County human-services agency

quite literally touched people and lifted them out of the gutter. At the same time, he touched them in spiritual, emotional and mental ways. He saw John or Mary or Bill and was overwhelmed" by the enormity of the problem.

Dutch met his wife at the Veteran's Administration Hospital where she was a nurse. They had two children, Jennifer Hayden of Tacoma and Joseph Shisler of Seattle.

"If you wanted to get him bragging, just ask him about his family," said Vanzo.

Although he was a legend to many, Dutch never took himself that seriously.

"He was an enormously human person. He was stubborn; he ate the wrong food; and he started a different exercise program every week that he had abandoned by Wednesday," Vanzo said.

Toward the end, when he knew he was going to die, he asked some of his closest friends to come see him and bring a joke.

"He asked me to speak at his funeral, and he said, 'Everybody's been so sad,'" said Vanzo. "I want you to tell them some of the enjoyable, funny things that happened. I want people to leave with a smile, not tears."

In addition to his wife and children, Dutch leaves behind his sister, Darlene McCrae of McMinnville, Ore., and members of the recovery community.

A celebration of his life will be held tomorrow at 7 p.m. at Christ the King Catholic Church, 405 N. 117th St., Seattle. Memorial contributions may be made to Group Health Hospice.

Christine Clarridge's phone message number is 206-464-8983. Her e-mail address is cclarridge@seattletimes.com.