

Mario Savio

On November 6, 1996, Mario Savio died before his time at the age of 53. Mario was one of the most passionate and eloquent voices in the struggle to end the disgrace of a massive underclass. Mario was a loyal friend of the ACLU of Sonoma County, and is dearly missed by those of us who knew him, worked with him, and loved him.

Most widely known for his leadership in the Free Speech Movement (FSM) at the University of California at Berkeley in the fall of 1964, for which he served four months in the Santa Rita jail, Mario was deeply committed to the Civil Rights Movement. Before the FSM, he had gone to Mississippi as a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activist in 1963 and 1964, and was arrested in the Sheraton Palace sit-ins in San Francisco demanding desegregation of the hotel's workforce in the spring of 1964. Unrivaled in his concern for fairness, Mario liked to remind people that it was the UC Berkeley administration's banning and removal of a Congress of Racial Equality table from Sproul Plaza that sparked the FSM. Mario was also one of the early leaders of the mass movement against the Vietnam War.

In his final years, Mario was deeply committed to preventing the implementation of Proposition 187 on our college campuses, to reversing Proposition 184, to defending affirmative action, and to working for adequate funding for public higher education. Prompted by deep concern over the conduct and results of the 1994 California and national elections, Mario joined with others to form the Campus Coalitions for Human Rights and Social Justice, a diverse group of students, faculty and nonacademic staff dedicated to achieving these goals. The coalition continues its work today at Sonoma State and on public campuses statewide.

In 1995 at our annual dinner, Mario delivered the keynote address to an overflowing room, and in so doing, returned to public political action after many years of refusing interviews with the press. He spoke again in 1996.

Mario dreaded the spotlight; it offended his natural sense of modesty. Nonetheless, he endured the stress of his celebrity when reason and compassion compelled him to speak out. Mario gave his heart to justice. He died as he had lived, in passionate concern, preparing a lawsuit to challenge an unfair process of imposing fee increases on working class and minority students.

We were privileged to have known this kind man who brought his special talents to our community enriching us all with his intellect, his moral fervor, his charm, and his transcendent nobility of spirit.