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OBITUARIES

Rodrick Best, 32; Environmentalist, Pivotal Figure in Recycling Efforts

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Rodrick "Rick" Best, the environmentalist who in a short, intense career battled Coca-Cola Co., Miller Brewing Co. and Dow AgroSciences on behalf of the California recycling movement, died Dec. 11 at Sutter General Hospital in Sacramento of complications after a car accident. He was 32.

His death has friends and family agreeing that he was an important advocate, but each singling out different accomplishments.

"There are a whole lot of people in this town who think Rick is their guy," said Mark Murray, executive director of the 25-year-old Sacramento lobbying group Californians Against Waste.

To Murray, Best was a bright engineering student from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo who, beginning in 1991, helped create from scratch the kind of waste disposal industry that has made California the national leader in recycling.

To former Assemblyman Fred Keely (D-Boulder Creek), Best was a staff member who helped shepherd a dozen environmental bills through the state Assembly, including AB 2214, which prevented creation of a radioactive-waste dump in the Mojave Desert's Ward Valley.

To the staff of Los Angeles Councilwoman Ruth Galanter, Best was the man who forced Miller Brewing to listen to the city Bureau of Sanitation before launching a new line of beer bottles.

To his family, he was the pioneer who opened up three Ventura County public schools to disabled children.

The youngest of five sons of an aerospace engineer father and social worker mother in Thousand Oaks, Best was a paraplegic whose spinal cord had been severed at birth.

But his disability did not make him acquiescent.

After a short stint in what was then known as an orthopedic school, Best wanted to be in the same schools as everyone else, said his father, Louis. The family waged the first of many battles for wheelchair access that made Best not just the first paraplegic in his elementary school, but also in his middle and high schools.

He was studying engineering at Cal Poly in 1990 when California enacted the nation's most aggressive recycling law, requiring half the state's waste stream to be diverted from dumps into recycling programs in the next 10 years. The penalty for local governments that missed the target would be fines of up to \$10,000 a day.

Best wanted to be part of the changeover. When Murray of Californians Against Waste appeared at his campus in a 1991 forum, "Rick rolled right up to me and said, 'I want to work for you guys,' " Murray said.

In 10 years, Best went from intern to the organization's policy director. Meeting the new recycling quotas required full-scale social change. Steven Jones, now a member of the California Integrated Waste Management Board, was a San Francisco garbage hauler at the time.

"The popular assumption was that you could put recyclable materials out at the curb and have a truck come pick them up and that they will automatically come back to the marketplace as another product," he said.

That was not, Jones stressed, the case. There was no market for discarded plastic soda bottles. Best, he said, not only saw the problem, but a solution:

hold the food industry accountable for the packaging it pumped into the environment.

Best went after Coca-Cola. Allen Hershkowitz, senior scientist with the Natural Resources Defense Council, a New York-based lobbying group, thought it one of Best's finest efforts.

"Coca-Cola made an initial commitment to use recycled plastic in 1989. When it reneged, Rick mobilized the environmental community nationally to begin a campaign against Coke," Hershkowitz said. The soft-drink giant pledged to incorporate 10% recycled content in its plastic bottles.

In January 1999, Best and Galanter took on Miller Brewing, which was the first major brewer to test-market plastic beer bottles in Southern California.

"We realized this was the test case," said Galanter's chief of staff, Niki Tennant. "If we could get Miller to use recycled content, and make the bottles recyclable, it was going to make a huge impact on the waste stream. We brought in a resolution right before the Super Bowl and got national media attention.

"We got Miller to sit down and make the bottle recyclable and put recycled content in it," said Tennant. "Rick was a brilliant strategist."

In 1998, Best became president of the GrassRoots Recycling Network, an organization designed to help activists around the country mount similar campaigns. Two years ago, he joined the staff of Central California Assemblyman Keely and began shepherding what Keely estimates were a dozen significant

bills through the Assembly to the governor's desk.

After the car accident in August, Best was in and out of consciousness as Gov. Gray Davis signed two Best bills. The first prohibits development of the Ward Valley landfill site and any unlined trench disposal system of radioactive waste anywhere in the state. The second bill demanded the removal of a Dow weed killer from lawn care products after it had been shown to contaminate compost made from recycled yard waste.

"Rick affected what happened in waste management in California," said Hershkowitz. "This is a subject where the nation looks to California for the lead. Rick made a very big difference in a very short time."

In addition to his father, Best is survived by his mother, Barbara, and brothers Phillip, David, Timothy and Christopher.