

Remembering the homeless

Twenty people without homes have died in Ventura County this year, and two local churches raise awareness of the problem

By [Paul Sisolak](#) 12/24/2008

THE LONGEST NIGHT

Cheryl Ann Mayberry. Roy Kahn. Jacob Henry. Kenneth Barlow. Deanna Mason. Donald Archer. Richard Newton.

There's almost a certain kind of anonymity to the above names, considering they belonged to people who passed away forgotten, seemingly without notice or acknowledgement or tribute. But those who may recognize these people will know they were among 20 people who died too young, neglected and without homes in Ventura County this year.

They were remembered posthumously during an outdoor ceremony on Sunday in honor of National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day, under the pagoda in Ventura's Plaza Park — a fitting locale, the place that many in the local homeless community who congregate there may actually call a home.

The first of its kind locally, the event was deliberately held the afternoon before the longest evening of the year, a symbolic gesture of every night in a homeless person's life, and the message two area Unitarian churches are seeking to convey: raise awareness of the plight of the homeless community.

Preventable deaths

"We just think it's important these deaths not go unrecognized and these people have a chance to be remembered," said Rev. Jan Christian, pastor of the Unitarian Universalist Church in Ventura.

Unfortunately, without the efforts of Christian or Carolyn Price, pastor of the Universalist Unitarian Church in Santa Paula, the deaths most likely would have gone unrecognized, as Ventura County's homeless population suffers from a short life expectancy chalked up to circumstances which Christian calls "not natural."

"These deaths were preventable," she said.

The oldest was Kahn at age 67; the youngest, Jacob Henry, 26. And that's going on information confirmed by authorities; some ages, in an almost John Doe fashion, couldn't even be determined. Without proper health care, or any at all, most died prematurely from illness. Some have expired from hypothermia, some have died in accidents or

assaults, some through drug abuse, and at least one fatality this year, according to Christian, was a suicide — coping with chronic homelessness was too much to bear.

“Homelessness is hazardous to one’s physical and mental health,” she says.

“You don’t see many make it to their 60s being on the streets. It’s tough being outside,” says Peter Brown, the community services manager for the City of Ventura, who was at the event.

Even for those who make homelessness a choice, it can be hard.

“We wanted to reach the homeless, so we became the homeless,” recounts Brenda Davis, who gave up her home in Ojai 19 years ago. Now 47, Davis has been on the streets nearly half of her adult life, but that hasn’t made it any easier to survive.

Places and spaces

“The fact is, there are homeless people in our back yard, in our front yard. They’re our neighbors,” says Christian. “It’s incumbent upon us to find places and spaces.”

One goal of the Unitarian churches is bringing to the fore the increased need for an emergency, year-round care shelter for the homeless. Currently, none exists in Ventura County, and it’s for that reason alone, arguably, that several of the deceased remembered on Sunday could otherwise still be alive today.

“One of them died in a riverbed,” Christian said. “A few of them were found in empty lots, that kind of thing.”

According to Karol Schulkin, the homeless services manager for the county, the closest arrangement is a winter shelter that alternates between Ventura and Oxnard. The former is located in the armory on Main Street and, based on turnout, is valued highly. Schulkin said on its opening night, Dec. 17, 99 people showed up for shelter from chilling temperatures.

“Partly because of the cold weather, partly because of the economy, there’s nobody else,” she said. “The numbers are building very quickly. It’s going to be a busy year.”

The quantity of people at the armory is just a small percentage of the complete county homeless population. Christian’s church takes part in an annual head count — a homeless census of sorts — and statistics are expected to exceed that of last year’s when the count takes place next month.

Currently, she said, 2,000 adults and 300 children are thought to be homeless here. What’s even more staggering: one in every five people (that’s 20,000 Ventura County residents) is at risk for becoming homeless.

And only one major event, says Christian, be it job loss, a resultant lack of income, a sudden traumatic event, or any substantial change in one's life is all it takes to leave one suddenly without a home.

One woman at the event told the story of her brother, who, at age 12, ran away to the streets after the unexpected death of their father. Unable to cope with the loss, he remained one of the Ventura homeless until his mid 50s, when he died three years ago. The life had caught up with him.

"Every day, homelessness is there," she said. "Not just one day of the week."

Not a crime

No matter the circumstance, it doesn't help that public perception of homelessness is on par with the worst types of racism and bigotry.

"When we talk about homelessness, an image comes to mind of a guy in the park with his bedroll," says Karl Keller, an activist involved with the churches' efforts. "People have a lot of (negative) images they pick up."

Most of those images, Keller says, are seen through eyes of misinformation.

"The bulk of homeless people you don't see," he explained. "They live in cars. They're sofa surfing. They're hiding from the law. They're people who are trying to get a job because it's cold and unpleasant out there on the street."

It isn't helped much by what Keller calls the aggressive behavior of transient panhandlers, who move from town to town, many of whom are not even homeless. It's ironic in a sense, because the homeless of Ventura or Oxnard, though not having a proper residence to their names, will tend to stay put and identify with one city.

"Panhandling doesn't necessarily imply anything about homelessness," Keller says.

A problem in itself, the city had started an initiative discouraging handouts to panhandlers a few years back. But the homeless, according to Keller, were unfortunately lumped into that camp and, as a result, don't get the attention or the help they need.

"The business owners were understandably concerned," said Christian. "For the most part, police response to them caused a lot of them to leave the area."

Of course, the lack of understanding or care may extend to the authorities. According to Davis, she and her homeless friends have encountered run-ins with the law, sometimes for no apparent reason — while sleeping in their cars, under bridges or on the street.

“They actually seek out where they sleep,” she said, referring to local police. “The cops, God bless them, but there are people out there abused by authorities.”

As Davis tries to explain, another homeless man approaches and speaks something unintelligible about being beaten. He holds out his wallet, caked with dried blood, and his message becomes clear.

Christian summed it up later while speaking at the event.

“The fact that we would ticket people on the street or in their cars when they have no alternative, to me, makes no sense at all,” she said. “Homelessness is not a crime.”

Every life has meaning

For the new year, there is hope for the activists, on the county level, that funding for a round-the-clock shelter can be secured, and that one can be built soon.

Schulkin, the county’s homeless services manager, says location scouting is ongoing. What is needed is somewhere easily accessible for the homeless, somewhere that offers temporary housing: a place to sober up, become drug free, to find employment.

“Hopefully, this’ll be the year it will happen,” she says. “There’s certainly more awareness to the need in the community. And growing support, moving in that direction.

“Nobody should pass out of this world unnoticed,” she continued. “Every life has meaning.”

Christian hopes to discourage the “NIMBY” attitude, the “Not In My Back Yard” sentiment that residents may feel: the tendency to want to back away from a neighborhood center in fear that the homeless demographic will tarnish the community.

“I think some people who are looking are hoping to find places that do seem to work and make some moves on that,” she said. “The only problem with being very public is it helps create resistance. It’s just not going to work to say, ‘Not in my backyard.’ ”

She encourages people to visit onecityventura.org and study the 10-year strategic plan to end homelessness countywide. Volunteers are being sought for the annual homeless count, which will take place on Jan. 27.

And on Feb. 16, an event for the Ventura Homeless Prevention Fund will be held (time and place have not yet been determined).

VENTURA COUNTY HOMELESS WHO DIED IN 2008

Roy Kahn, 67

John Sullivan, 56

Cheryl Mayberry, 58

Clifford Warren, 56

Kenneth Barlow, 54

Kevin Asuncion, 37

Duncan Rey, 55

Donald Archer, 48

Jacob Henry, 26

Dwayne Gillespie, 59

Steve Sampson, 57

Rob Roy Brown, 54

Serafin Bostello, 43

Deanna Mason, 52

Richard Newton, 37

James Larman, 31

Michael Montero, age unknown

Raymond Nasser, age unknown

Mike Scamaldo, age unknown

James Beck, age unknown

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