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Vigil honors homeless who died

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As the longest night of the year fell on Atlanta, about 100 people gathered on the edge of downtown Friday to light candles honoring the homeless dead.

In the chill of the evening, with MARTA trains rumbling by, they paid tribute to people most never knew.

"When homeless folks die, they just die," said Robert Mason, director of community relations for St. Joseph's Mercy Care Services, sponsor of the vigil, which took place outside its Decatur Street headquarters. "We want to bring attention to those folks who have passed in a quiet death and call their names."

They sounded out 65 names in all— men and women who lived on the streets and in shelters, who were mentally ill, drug-addicted or just down on their luck.

Stacey Fortner

On a brutally cold day last winter, Fortner climbed a fence to huddle outside Central Presbyterian Church, where she often found friendship, doughnuts and hot coffee.

In her 40s, she was a "sweet lady" who was developmentally disabled, mentally ill and had abused drugs, said the Rev. Andy Gans, then director of the church's outreach center. She was frequently robbed of the money from her disability check, he said, so she survived by prostitution.

Early one morning, Gans said, she told him she was tired of selling herself and tired of doing drugs. For hours he and his co-workers tried to find a rehabilitation program for her, to no avail. That evening, she stayed, as she always did, under an interstate overpass.

That cold day last winter, workers called 911 and sent her to Grady Memorial Hospital. Gans was with her when she died the next night.

Tim Green

Green was living with a girlfriend earlier this year after five years on the streets.

From 2002 until early 2007, he had stayed at shelters and had eaten in soup kitchens.

He had once abused drugs, said Al Wright, director of communications and security at Crossroads Community Ministries, Atlanta, but lately he was clean and sober.

On Oct. 17, Green came to Crossroads to spend time with Wright, who had known him for more than 10 years—from a time when Green had a job and a home.

"He sat here with me all day and we just talked and laughed and talked about old times," said Wright, who added he believed Green was 43.

The next morning, Green was cooking breakfast when he dropped to the floor, the victim of an apparent heart attack. Efforts to revive him failed.

Ann Heyman

Heyman was not really homeless. She had lived in a personal care home in Grant Park since mid 2006. She had entered Grady Memorial Hospital for psychiatric care with no identification and no teeth.

Through Crossroads Community Ministries, she was able to get identification, disability assistance and dentures.

Earlier this year she was confirmed into the Episcopal Church as a member of Holy Comforter, a small congregation whose membership is largely residents of personal care homes. She learned to weave and was planning a tapestry to hang behind the altar, said the Rev. Mike Tanner, the church's vicar.

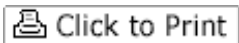
"She had come to a place of great contentment," he said. "She said not long ago she was the happiest she'd ever been."

When Heyman, 61, died on Dec. 2 at Grady, she left behind a family who loved her.

"We all cared about her," said her stepmother, Sarra David. "But we realized the caring was not enough."

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