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Gazette Opinion: Lights of hope for homeless people

Sunshine was bright at noon Monday as a small crowd gathered on the Yellowstone County Courthouse lawn to remember and honor homeless people. A cold breeze that threatened to extinguish vigil candles was a small reminder of the hardships that constantly surround those of us who are living without homes or shelter.

Commissioner Bill Kennedy read a proclamation from the County Commission, declaring Monday a homeless remembrance day and December a month of homeless awareness. Clarence Salley of Health Care for the Homeless said that he had known 50 homeless people who have died by homicide, suicide, exposure to the elements or lack of treatment for health problems. Gary Drake gave thanks that Billings has many people who care about those who are homeless. Representatives of the Yellowstone City-County Health Department, the Mental Health Center's HUB drop-in center, the St. Vincent de Paul Society and the Mayor's Task Force on Homelessness were on hand.

But most of Monday's vigil crowd were students from Central Heights Elementary. Teachers Kris Cummings and Deanna O'Neil brought 45 fifth-graders and several parents to the courthouse memorial.

Why were the fifth-graders there?

They had all read a novel, "Maniac Magee," in which the main character was a homeless boy. They wanted to learn more about people who are homeless, the students said.

Before the memorial service, half of the students toured Montana Rescue Mission's Women's and Family Shelter while the other half toured the Men's Mission. After the service, the school bus was scheduled to take them to the shelters they hadn't yet toured.

The walk through the Women's and Family Shelter was humbling for many students.

"The rooms were really small," Addie Sternad said. "I think we should have a bake sale to help them."

"Their (family) rooms were no bigger than my bedroom," Shelly Bangerter said. "I felt really bad."

The classes had already planned to help. O'Neil said the students will be making sandwiches at school to donate to the Rescue Mission's outreach program, in which vans deliver food and other necessities to needy local people six nights a week.

Many things contribute to homelessness, including loss of a job, low pay, high housing costs, mental illnesses and chemical dependency. The National Health Care for the Homeless Council estimates that 2.3 million to 3.5 million people are homeless at some point during an average year and that 13.5 million Americans have experienced homelessness at least once.

Meeting that challenge requires thinking about homeless individuals, not just numbers. As Drake said, "We try to keep hope alive for one more person."

With the longest night of the year drawing near, the cold and darkness make this a fitting time to reflect on how those with the least can be helped more. Consider volunteering or donating to local organizations that provide hope to homeless people. It's not hard; even fifth-graders can do it.

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