

The Columbus Dispatch

Ohio's Greatest Online Newspaper

WINTER SOLSTICE SERVICE

Memorial honors forgotten homeless

Thursday, December 20, 2007 3:17 AM

BY JEB PHILLIPS

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

A man named Melvin Armentrout died Aug. 4. Only the most dedicated obituary readers will have known that, and even they may have missed it. His entry was five sentences long.

He was homeless, 52 years old, drank a lot and one day had a seizure that put him into a coma. The brother who had the most contact with him, who had gotten him several jobs to no avail, decided to take him off of life support.

His mother had cleaned houses for a living, and his father drove tractor-trailers. They are gone now. He had seven siblings and grew up on the South and West sides. He went to the old Central High School but didn't finish. He was gay, which angered his parents, and he had a tough time with it himself. He was a Christian, his brother said, and had been taught that his sexuality and his faith didn't match.

"People said if you are homosexual, you cannot know God," said the brother, Rick Armentrout. "I believe you can, but I know he had a hard time with the stigma."

Maybe that struggle helped put him on the street. Maybe it was his depression, or his bipolar disorder, or his alcoholism, or the death of his long-time partner. Maybe he just didn't take care of himself. Whatever it was, he lived in the woods off of Greenlawn Avenue for three years.

Then came the five-sentence obituary. His brother wanted more -- wanted to have a memorial service for him, but other family members were having troubles, too. So Melvin Armentrout was cremated and his ashes were left at a sister's grave.

That's a lot more than some other people on "the list" received, though. There's no obituary for half of them. Some don't even seem to have their real names on the list of homeless dead: Tyrone S., Scoot Hipman, Frankie Toledo.

Donahue Mathis was found murdered behind a garbage bin in South Linden. Dale Shimp fell off of a bridge in Mount Vernon while he was looking for firewood.

There are 42 people, all homeless or formerly homeless, on the list. The Columbus Coalition for the Homeless gathers their names from member agencies every year and conducts an interfaith memorial service for them near the winter solstice. The solstice is the longest night and shortest day of the year. It's the hardest time to be on the streets, said Bill Casto, the co-director of the coalition.

This year's solstice is Saturday. The memorial is tonight.

"These people might not have had other services," Casto said. And this one draws attention to homelessness in a way that a service for one person wouldn't, he said.

Armentrout made the newspaper twice in his life. Once when he died, and once when he was arrested for public indecency at Whetstone Park in 1991. He has a brief court record: a couple of evictions, a citation for standing at a roadside and soliciting money. Otherwise, he led a quiet life.

He never really worked, said Rick and two other brothers, Tim and Danny Armentrout. The only job they remembered him having was as a busboy at a Bob Evans, but that might have been decades ago. He liked to draw and once dreamed of designing women's clothes, Danny said. He relied on the person he was dating at the time to take care of him, Rick said. He had some government help with housing. He didn't show up for the jobs that Rick helped him get.

His partner of at least 10 years, whom they knew only as "Vince," died a few years ago, his brothers said. After that, Melvin stopped taking care of himself. He drank more. He felt worse. In the end, he got five sentences in the paper.

The annual interfaith memorial service will take place at 5:30 tonight at Trinity Episcopal Church, 125 E. Broad St., Downtown.

Jeb.phillips@dispatch.com

Copyright © 2007, The Columbus Dispatch
