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Neighborhoods

A vigil for the homeless, past and present

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By Dan Majors, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Rebecca Droke/Post-Gazette

Timothy Lynn attends Operation Safety Net's memorial service for the six individuals who died while living on the streets of Pittsburgh in 2007. Mr. Lynn has lived on the streets of the North Side for four years. The service is part of the National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day on the first day of winter. Operation Safety Net honors those who have died with plaques on the Monroeville Exit overpass on Grant Street.

The cold wind blowing under the highway ramp last night made it hard for those taking part in the vigil for the homeless to keep their flickering candles lit. But the 30 people attending were not inclined to give up.

The candles were part of Operation Safety Net's service remembering the six homeless people who died on the streets of Pittsburgh in 2007.

It's a disheartening number, but it's five fewer deaths than the city's homeless community experienced last year. The people with Operation Safety Net, which offers medical and social services to the approximately 1,200 homeless individuals in Pittsburgh, take comfort in that.

"It's very difficult to be there all the time," said Dr. James S. Withers, founder and medical director of Operation Safety Net. "Some of the folks, I get a very strong sense that they're going to die. Sometimes it's medical. But there's also a spiritual component. I can just tell, looking into [their] eyes, that they're giving up and that we're probably going to lose them."

The beginning of winter is recognized across the country as National Homeless Persons' Memorial Day. Those gathered last night at the intersection of Grant Street and Fort Pitt Boulevard, under a highway ramp leading out of town, included staff members, volunteers, church representatives, children, some homeless people and a relative of one of those remembered. They spoke about those who died, offered prayers and sang "Amazing Grace."

Hanging on the concrete wall were 88 plaques -- including one that reads "unknown" -- in commemoration of the homeless people who died in Pittsburgh and the years in which they passed, dating back to 1989.

"This is a meaningful location because I've known a lot of the people who slept on these

stones," said Dr. Withers, who founded Operation Safety Net in 1992. "We remember these folks. But I really celebrate the ones that are able to courageously get their lives together and get off the streets."

In 2006, the program helped 53 people to housing. This year's total, though not final, probably will be higher, he said.

The six homeless people remembered last night were:

- James Singletary (He is incorrectly listed as "John" on the plaque.) He was a quiet man who would volunteer to help others out.
- Sonya Thomas had a cat and loved to sing. She was remembered as "a people person" who gave of herself.
- Gerald Tokar was an intelligent man who once worked with NASA's Apollo program. Jerry tried to make those around him better off.
- Larry Mays used a wheelchair and had a great sense of humor. An educated man, he had a healthy appetite and always had a smile on his face.
- Dirk Payne struggled to lead a normal life, losing battles against forces he could not control. He was trying, and that's what counted.
- Vernon Howard was a mystery man, whose remains were found.

"Maybe it's appropriate," Dr. Withers said, "that we end with a man who otherwise would be forgotten. We pray that he is at peace."

Of the six homeless people who died, Dr. Withers said, two were killed. One died from infection and one from alcoholism. Two died of unknown causes.

Joe Edwards, 44, one of the homeless men at the ceremony, spoke of the "community" of homeless people in Pittsburgh, who "stick together."

"They help each other out," said Mr. Edwards, who used to live in the Turtle Creek area but now spends his nights in a doorway off a driveway Downtown. "If there's a new person, they'll show them where to go."

"This is an opportunity for us to acknowledge that we're all connected, that we're all brothers and sisters, and that the folks that passed away are not forgotten," Dr. Withers said. "This is not just about the people who have died, but also people that are still out there. People that are cold, that are hungry, that feel that they're alone. We remember them and we dedicate ourselves to making sure that they know that there's love and there's hope, if we work together."

"Unfortunately, I know we'll be here again next year."

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