

Homeless who died remembered today

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Robert Witham keeps his sweetheart's driver's license in his pocket. It's all he has to remember his "Mama Bear."

Becky Sue Taylor, 44, died March 31 of a stroke after she didn't get medical treatment. She was homeless, and the love of his life. Witham doesn't want her to be forgotten.

This year, she won't be.

For the first time, San Antonio will join more than 100 cities across the country in the National Homeless Persons Memorial Day, joining a national tradition that began in 1990 on the first day of winter — the longest night of the year.

Tonight, during a memorial candlelight vigil, a local coalition will toll a bell and read the names of Taylor and 13 others who the coalition believes were homeless when they died in San Antonio this year.

"They were real people, with real lives. They were mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, friends and spouses," said the Rev. Becky Hamann, manager of spiritual services for SAMMinistries. "The pain of losing a loved one is the same for all of us, whether we have homes or not, whether we lived in poverty or wealth."

Taylor took her last breath at 9:05 a.m., Witham said. The couple met at a homeless shelter in Fort Worth 13 years ago and then made San Antonio's motels and shelters their home. Witham, 49, proudly talks about how sweet Taylor was.

"We might not have been rich in money, but we were rich in many other ways," said Witham, who is still homeless.

Although the names of 14 dead will be read today, no one knows how accurate that count is. No local agency tracks such information.

"It is difficult to know how many people actually died while homeless," Hamann said. "We attempted to collect as many names as possible as a way of treating each person with dignity and respect, even after death. We would like to use their names as a way of saying they are more than a statistic or 'the homeless.'"

According to the National Health Care for the Homeless Council, the average age

of death of homeless persons is about 50, compared with 78 for other Americans.

Living on the street without health care is a big reason for that. "You have to know where you're at," Witham said. "A lot of people take advantage of you. There is drugs and violence; they don't fight like they did in the old days — fisticuffs," he said. "Now there are knives, guns, anything they can get, and they don't fight alone."

Grace Lutheran Church Pastor Curt Pedder said remembering the homeless dead is a worthwhile cause.

"The homeless are a part of our society and our culture; if we are truly 'celebrating diversity' as the (politically correct) folks would have us do, then we have no choice but to include those who are so often forgotten and marginalized. This may sound crass and not pietistic, but I believe it is a reality that should be addressed and recognized," Pedder said.

In 2006, 2,222 people across the country were identified as homeless when they died, according to national advocates.

Megan Hustings, development director at the National Coalition for the Homeless in Washington, D.C., said it is difficult for any city to get an accurate count of its homeless dead because of varying definitions of homeless people.

Still, she said, the events are important.

"A lot of times, people are usually shoved under the carpet. You pass someone on the street but you ignore them. This is a day to remember the dead, but also those who are living," Hustings said.

When a homeless person dies with no next of kin who can pay for the burial, the county's pauper burial program pays for the service.

Guillermo Puente, owner of Puente & Sons Funeral Chapels, handles Bexar County's pauper burials at First Memorial Park Cemetery in Von Ormy.

This year, Puente recalls burying Taylor and three other homeless people: a 52-year-old man who died of pneumonia in February; a 55-year-old man who died of cancer of the sinus in April; and a 34-year-old man who died in July of an unknown cause.

The bodies of homeless people are bathed and dressed in new clothes and placed in a cloth-covered wooden box. Puente says a brief prayer before the casket is lowered into the ground.

"It's not a matter of just taking them and throwing them in a box and burying them. It's somebody's child. It's the least we can do as human beings for one another," Puente said. "They've had a hard life and end up penniless and homeless. The least we can do is give them a good burial. "