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Memorial to recall people we never saw

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They plan to gather at dusk, in a small square of green surrounded by big city skyscrapers.

The suit-and-tie crowd that fills Tampa's Courthouse Square park at lunchtime is generally long gone by 6 p.m. But maybe today some of them will stay for the quiet ceremony, standing beside homeless people who know downtown after dark as well as they know the weight of the bedrolls on their backs.

Today is Homeless Persons' Memorial Day, to mark the lives of people who died while living on the street. The first time I went to the memorial service, I was surrounded by politicians, homeless advocates, downtown workers and people shouldering grubby backpacks that held their lives, listening as the names of the homeless who died in Hillsborough that year were read aloud, a candle lit for each one. I remember a man who cried and wouldn't say why, just that it reminded him of his own mistakes.

They read 42 names that year. Last year, they had 50. This year, they're up to 63.

The list of the invisible - or all-too visible, depending on whom you ask - died being hit by cars, or being beaten. They drowned, or they died of medical conditions that had not been treated. A man was killed by a fire that was supposed to see him through the cold night. It is not surprising to see suicide on the list.

They are 58 men and five women, the oldest Gilbert Cornwell, 74, the youngest Lorenzo Dean, 22. Men called Jimbo, Donald and A.J. died without anyone figuring out their last names.

If the national statistic holds, one in four were veterans, not the sort of legacy America wants to think about.

This year, Pinellas County holds memorials of its own in St. Petersburg, Clearwater and Pinellas Park.

So what's the point, when no one seems to want to see them in the first place?

"People hardly look at homeless people who are alive on the street. Their deaths go completely ignored," Hillsborough's Homeless Coalition spokeswoman Lesa Weikel says. "Just for human dignity, their lives need to be recognized."

"I think it's a moral obligation that we understand no Americans should be sleeping on the sidewalks of our country," says Jamie Bennett, chairman of the St. Petersburg City Council and the Homeless Leadership Network.

Cities on the move like ours struggle for answers even as spare budget dollars dry to dust. Developers trying to sell a downtown "lifestyle" don't like it. Police are in the middle, particularly in the wake of what was pretty much an outright PR disaster. (Remember St. Pete cops slashing tents in a homeless camp? People in Tampa arrested for the terrible crime of trying to feed the hungry?)

There is an older guy who wears funny sunglasses I see downtown by the library often enough to know his friends call him Jeffrey. There are two Jeffreys on the list. I find myself hoping neither is him.

Whoever they are, they will still be people who once had parents, birthdays, a life.

Today, they'll say the names of the invisible who finally are just that.

* * *

- Tampa's candlelight interfaith memorial service will be at Joe Chillura Courthouse Square on Kennedy Boulevard at 6 p.m.

- For information on today's services in St. Petersburg, Clearwater and Pinellas Park, call the Pinellas Coalition for the Homeless at (727) 528-5832.

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