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Memorial honors the often-forgotten

By Stephanie Innes

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Workers at the Primavera Foundation, where Gordon Allison Jr. often went to get bus passes and toiletries, always recognized his hearty laugh.

"I miss it terribly. The other day I was sure I could hear it through the walls. Of course, it wasn't Gordon," said Diana Robledo, operations supervisor for relief and referral at Primavera, which provides services for the homeless and impoverished.

"I spoke with him every day."

Allison, 44, grew up in Sacaton, capital of the Gila River Indian Community. Though Robledo doesn't know how Allison came to live on Tucson's streets, she did know he was battling alcoholism.

He died in October after being hit by a van as he was walking north across East 22nd Street just east of South Third Avenue at night.

Allison was one of 125 people who died in Pima County's streets, deserts and washes or in extreme poverty between Nov. 1, 2006, and Nov. 1, 2007. All were honored Friday with a memorial service in the county plot of Evergreen Cemetery and Mortuary, 3015 N. Oracle Road.

The dead included 16 Jane and John Does. No next-of-kin was ever found for 55 of the deceased.

Robledo remembers many of those who died homeless in the past year. The Pima County Medical Examiner's Office and the Public Fiduciary, which oversees indigent burials, often contact her to identify bodies.

She and others urged the community to pay more attention to those living on local streets, and to regard them with respect.

The service was held at the county's grave site for indigents, a dirt field behind a hedge at the back of Evergreen Cemetery. It was among more than 90 such memorials nationwide, according to the National Health Care for the Homeless Council.

"We are going through a very difficult time as a nation," said Tucson City Council member Regina Romero, who spoke at the local service. "There is so much need in our community, our nation, our world. ... We as a nation need to look inward, become more of a family. We need to become more united."

Others memorialized here Friday included 50-year-old Juan Marquez, who died of liver and kidney failure after tripping and falling. Robledo said Marquez suffered alcoholism and was tired of living on the streets.

Lillian Ruth Wright, whose death was more well-known, was a homeless woman known as Sunshine who was slain in June. Her body was found in a pool of blood outside the law offices where the occupants let her live. She was a Lakota Sioux from the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota.

Tim Herber, whom Robledo believes was in his 40s, died after falling from a ladder and breaking his neck. He suffered from a drug addiction and lived on the streets.

"We are all potentially homeless people," said Laurie Melrood of the conservative Jewish Congregation Eshel Avraham, one of the faith leaders who offered blessings at the service. "That structure can fall around you at any point and time."

The average age at death of homeless people is about 50, the age at which Americans commonly died in 1900. Today, non-homeless Americans can expect to live to age 78, according to the national council.

The 125 dead did not include the undocumented men, women and children who died while crossing the Southern Arizona desert into the United States from Mexico by foot. In the most recent federal fiscal year, 204 bodies were found in the U.S. Border Patrol's Tucson Sector, a 21 percent increase over the previous year.

- *Contact reporter Stephanie Innes at 573-4134 or sinnes@azstarnet.com.*

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