

Death be not housed in Sacramento

Sacramento Loaves & Fishes ceremony recalls homeless lives cut short

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When city officials, advocates and those without housing met in Friendship Park one late morning in December 2013 to commemorate recent homeless deaths, few expected a story as heartbreaking as that of Janet Steinbach.

On May 31, 2011, Steinbach's homeless 29-year-old son, Adam, was stabbed to death while sleeping in his vehicle near Highway 160 and Northgate Boulevard in Sacramento.

Devastated, Steinbach began spending time at the scene of her son's murder—planting, watering and trimming flowers around the small cross that Adam's friends had placed for him. She maintained this spot for 20 months. The homeless community who spent time under the bridge at Highway 160 came to befriend Steinbach, even helping to dig and water her small garden.

“What changed me forever was the love and compassion from the homeless community who stood by me almost every day I planted,” she said.

Those in attendance for Steinbach's speech at Sacramento Loaves & Fishes' Friendship Park on December 20 learned just minutes before that Adam's story is far from unique.

A new study released by the Sacramento Regional Coalition to End Homelessness showed that in the past 11 years, the county was home to 501 deaths in the homeless community.

In actuality, the study's authors say the true number of homeless deaths is almost certainly higher than reported in the study, which culled data from the county coroner's office.

The coroner has yet to issue a final report on Vincent McKinney, a homeless man who was reportedly beaten to death in a park across from the Crocker Art Museum on November 27, 2013.

An eyewitness called 911 to report a fight between two men at the park. By the time the first officers arrived, a pummeled McKinney already lay unconscious on the ground. Officers knelt beside McKinney and administered CPR for several minutes until paramedics arrived and took over, but it was too late. The 51-year-old was dead.

“It was a sad set of circumstances,” recalled Sacramento Police Sgt. Matt Young.

Young said officers located Arthur Allen Bird II in the “immediate vicinity” of the crime scene. Before the fight ensued, McKinney and Bird were seen sitting at a picnic table together. Young said they were “at minimum acquaintances.”

Officers were able to determine that the suspect “consumed some alcohol at some point during the day,” and Bird was arraigned on one count of felony murder and appointed a public defender on December 3, 2013, according to Sacramento Superior Court records.

The transitory nature of the victims can make it difficult to track down witnesses and evidence, Young explained. “Obviously, every case is different.”

For her part, Steinbach, like many advocates, wants the county to address the unsettling pattern of untimely and preventable deaths in the homeless community. For now, she donates three hours of her time each week working with Sacramento Self Help Housing to assist the people she has come to love in acquiring homes of their own.