

Homeless memorial casts light on forgotten deaths

Boyle Street observance remembers 57 who died on street last year

BY NATHAN LIEWICKI, EDMONTON JOURNAL

Published: Sunday, January 23, 2011



The sixth annual homeless memorial at the Boyle Street Community Services on Jan. 22, 2011, held in memory of 57 homeless men and women who died in Edmonton in 2010.

Photograph by: Brian J. Gavriloff , The Journal

With the aroma of burning wax in the air and the sounds of an acoustic guitar and Irish whistle filling the room, Rhonda Moostoos and her son Percy Dewolfe patiently waited for their chance to pay tribute to Edmontonians who died because of homelessness.

Moostoos didn't personally know any of the city's 57 homeless people who died in 2010, but said she and her son each wanted to light a candle in memory of them all.

"It's terrible hearing of so many people dying of homelessness. It's a lonely time for a lot of people right now, but I felt a lot of peace here today," she said.

Moostoos was one of about 200 people who filed through the backdoor of the Boyle Street Community Services for the sixth annual citywide Homeless Memorial. The event is run by the Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness.

Lorette Garrick is the coalition's spokeswoman and the executive director of the George Spady Centre. She said the yearly event is a way for the community to come together and pay their respects to people whose deaths could have been prevented.

"We really wanted to remember everyone who was homeless," said Garrick. "It gives friends an opportunity to gather and remember people they knew."

Of the 57 known deaths caused directly or indirectly from homelessness last year, Garrick says very few are a result of freezing to death during the winter month.

"They died as a result of not having their health care needs looked after and from an accumulation of many years spent on the street," she said.

A man named Jesse, who has spent the last eight years on the streets but didn't reveal his last name, also lit a candle in celebration of a friend who died last March. He said his friend died from an apparent drug overdose.

"There are lots of problems you can get into when you're homeless like me and him. My guess is he just had enough of living without a home and chose to die," he said.

Keith Harding, the president of the coalition on housing and homelessness, said the memorial is always a difficult day.

"It's not acceptable, it doesn't have to happen and we don't want to be standing here next year commemorating more deaths," he said.

Next year there will be a permanent memorial for the more than 250 homeless deaths that have occurred since 2005.

John Acheson, who emceed the memorial, said the event casts light on people who are often forgotten in society.

"We must never forget that homelessness has a face."

nliewicki@edmontonjournal.com