



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

Buried in obscurity *The Boston Globe*
Found dead on Causeway Street in June, his body awaits a nameless final rest. Thursday, a Beacon Hill church pauses to recall the recently departed homeless.

By Ric Kahn, Globe Staff | December 17, 2006

He's somebody that nobody wants.

Boston police found him on the morning of June 2. He was sprawled on the ground of Causeway Street, across from TD Banknorth Garden. He was wearing blue jeans and a 1995 Boston Marathon jacket.

He was dead.

More than six months have passed. Nobody has stepped forward to claim him as kin. Nobody has been able to piece together the identity of this evidently solitary man. Nobody will say how he succumbed, though police say it was not a homicide.

All that the authorities possess are the mute fragments of a presumed homeless man's life: white male . . . mid-30s to mid-40s . . . 5 foot 9 . . . medium build.

Earlier this month, the state Office of the Chief Medical Examiner finished compiling an inventory of his mortal form. Workers took fingerprints. They collected DNA. They snapped X-rays of chest and skull. They captured dental images, noting a missing left front tooth. They photographed the accumulation of tattoos scrawled across his body, from the foot-wide "Terminator" lettering on his abdomen, to the portrait of a woman's face peering from his left shoulder, to the yin-and-yang symbol wrapped around his right leg.

To officials, this catalog will create a permanent record of his physical features, and may help investigators determine his identity through street contacts, and as they check missing persons reports, run his fingerprints through a national database, and circulate details through the news media.

For now, the anonymous man remains lodged within a walk-in cooler at the state's South End morgue, wrapped in a white vinyl mortuary bag, a numbered ID tag dangling from his big toe. He is joined in the morgue by 49 other unclaimed bodies, though most do have names.

From there, if family do not rush in to bid him farewell, his body can be released for burial two weeks after the police conclude their investigation, which has no timetable and remains open. He is destined to be placed in a basic pressed-wood casket and laid into an unmarked plot in the pauper's section of the city cemetery.

As winter approaches, and a National Homeless Persons Memorial Day service beckons this Thursday in Boston, the tattooed man's fate fills the city's street people with fear when they are told of his unfinished tale.

They don't want to die alone like him, they say.

"It means you didn't accomplish nothing," says Robert Goode, 43, taking a break from his downtown panhandling one recent morning. "You haven't made your mark on the planet."

Then again, says Goode, he's really done nothing to send people into orbit. He ended up on the street about eight months ago, he says, after he lost his subsidized apartment when he was arrested on a charge of dealing crack.

"I want to be remembered," says Goode, wearing a white parka against the chill. "But I didn't do nothing for anybody to remember me by."

During his days on the street, he says, he's had a guy accidentally urinate on him at a shelter. He's heard rats gnawing at his bag of handout goodies as he slept on the Common.

But going out like the tattooed man would be worse, Goode says, for it would mean an indifferent end to a troubled life.

"Nobody comes to your funeral," he says. "Nobody cares."

Goode looks toward his street friend, Mike Henry.

"It would be nice to have somebody at my funeral," says Goode. "The only person I know would be at my funeral would be Mikey."

Henry says, "If I can make it." Then he breaks up laughing.

Moments before, he was dead serious.

Henry, who's been homeless more than a decade, was saying that he wants to be buried back home in South Carolina.

"I want to be with my family instead of just a bunch of other dead people," Henry, 51, was saying. "Nobody would put no flowers on your grave. No name."

Just a number is how potter's graves are currently marked at the rolling southwestern section of Fairview -- the city cemetery in Hyde Park -- that workers call the City Poor Lot.

The state will kick in up to \$1,100 for an indigent burial there as long as the total bill isn't more than \$1,500. (If the cost is between \$1,100 and \$1,500, the difference must be paid by another source.)

According to the state, a statute requires that those graves bear the names of the deceased, but that has not been happening for years, according to the city.

City officials last week could not explain why. State officials said they were unaware and are investigating the matter. A register of names matching numbers is available in the cemetery office.

For longtime funeral director Joseph Russo, one of more than a dozen who handle such welfare burials in Boston, oft times it's just him and the gravediggers standing on the hilly soil as a destitute person is eased into the ground.

"The hardest thing is not having someone there to offer a tear or prayer," says Russo, 62, proprietor of the Joseph Russo Funeral Home in Roslindale.

Russo quietly offers both.

"A funeral is always sad," he says.

For the impoverished departed, Russo recites to himself the Prayer of St. Francis : " . . . Where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light. . . . " He pays special heed to the final line: "And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life."

On Thursday , advocates for the homeless and others will hold a much larger ceremony, gathering at 2 p.m. at Bowdoin Street's Church on the Hill (Swedenborgian) to commemorate those who died across the state without a home. They will recite a roll call of remembrance for the ones they know have died during the previous 12 months.

The roster is still being compiled. At press time, the tattooed man remained unidentified. If he makes the list at all, it will likely be as a John Doe, in the company of Bill D. , Betty W. , Booker S. , and others.

One advocate for the homeless, Jim Stewart, has attended previous memorials. When the John and Jane Does are announced, he says, his mind envisions someone's final hours, hidden beneath packing-crate pads below an underpass, or lying on a gurney in an emergency ward. His gut, he says, fills with a dull dread.

"It's like a cipher, a placeholder, a person who's passed away without an identity, without a certain dignity we feel every one is entitled to," says Stewart, director of the First Church Shelter , in Cambridge.

Ken Dodson , 46, says he doesn't want the lights turned out like that. He's got too much to get off his chest to go unescorted into the dark, he says.

He was a truck driver from Montana who got derailed by the heroin he used to kill the chronic pain in his back, he says. Occupational hazard. Now he's a homeless panhandler with a prison record, he says, stuck on the streets of Boston.

If he had his druthers, Dodson says, he'd find comfort with his family before he passes, and eternally in their plot overlooking a river, in Montana.

Ending up planted in a Boston potter's field, he says, would create for him a disjointed descent into death.

"I would feel like a loser," says Dodson, fingering a self-rolled cigarette. "You don't see your loved ones for the last time."

To his mother, he says, he'd never get to say: "I love you, Mom. I'm sorry I put you through this. I didn't want to grow up like this."

To the two grown daughters back West he says he hasn't seen since they were babies, he'd miss out on telling them: "I'm sorry for not being a good father. I can barely take care of myself.

"I live on the street."

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