

Column: There But For Grace

Bridging the Homeless Gap

By Stephanie Dunlap

The peril of living in a river city is you could end up dying on a bridge. The peril of living is you could end up living under a bridge. Then you might end up dying under a bridge.

While we mourn Minneapolis' commuters who fell to their death when a highway bridge collapsed, a local man died under what continues to be a serviceable bridge.

The WCPO/Channel 9 Web site reported Aug. 4 that an early morning passerby spotted the deceased under Fort Washington Way. The report said the death was possibly heat-related, he "is thought" to be homeless and officers believe the man "frequently stayed nearby."

What's "nearby?" Posh Fourth Street is nearby. Or did he stay so "nearby" a bridge as to sleep on a ledge or squat in a tent camp underneath it and then die there in this heat emergency?

Aside: This is why I can't watch TV news.

The heat's made me cranky all weekend. At least that's all it's made me.

I'm upset, too, because I might have just met this dead man.

One of the street outreach workers I've spent the past few weeks following around almost certainly knew him. Probably those police officers did, too.

I might have met this man, but I don't know. According to the news report as of my deadline, officials are waiting to notify his next of kin before releasing the name.

But if it was Pokemon, he probably had a more official handle: Robert Smith Jr. or the like. An unremarkable name much like your quiet neighbor who faithfully drives to work every morning and pays his taxes early. Not a name for a professional panhandler living under a bridge.

Last year the Cincinnati/Hamilton County Continuum of Care demographic report identified nearly 10,000 homeless people. Not all of them voluntarily access shelter and housing services, so Cincinnati's handful of full-time street outreach workers venture out to meet those disengaged homeless where they live (squat, sleep, dine, shoot up, nest, work the streets, commune).

The main idea is to get them first into some type of shelter, then from transitional housing into permanent housing, addressing along the way those issues that initially landed them on the streets.

I followed around street outreach teams from both Lighthouse Youth Services and PATH, a collaborative effort between Greater Cincinnati Behavioral Health Services and Tender Mercies. Three of the outreach workers seek out homeless youth under age 26. Three others try to engage homeless mentally ill adults. One more outreach worker targets homeless adults in the Central Business District.

But if you're not under 26, mentally ill or sleeping on the downtown streets, no one's out looking for you. And it could be that no one's looking out for you.

This very visibly excludes from current street outreach the adult substance abusers and addicts. In addition, the county mental health board recognizes a very narrow slate of mental illnesses, excluding diagnoses such as personality disorders. So if you don't have the right mental illness, you're out of luck twice over.

I don't know what his diagnosis is, but Pokemon sure was affable early in the morning. His elaborate tent camp featured what PATH outreach workers billed as a "homeless library" -- he'd stacked a dozen Encyclopedia Britannicas next to a few hockey and golf trophies.

How'd you get those up here, we asked Pokemon, who cartoonishly stretched out after waking up from his slumber. He pointed to a grocery cart. But how'd you get that up here? He flexed and grinned toothlessly.

When we took our leave, he groused good-naturedly for waking him and not even staying for a visit.

Under another bridge two men perched blearily on the bare concrete ledges where I assumed they'd stretched prone last night. We wobbled up to them across loose concrete shards and picked around constellations of strewn 40s.

One of the men was familiar with the PATH team. Another man, remarkable to me for the emptiness of his expression, appeared to be a new arrival. Their tiny black-brown kitten mewed at our feet.

"If you ever want to come in," suggested one of the outreach team. The men nodded.

Street outreach is about forming relationships, which can take (choose as many as apply): time; repeated contact; aimless conversation; the passenger seats of heated vans in the frigid winter; gifts of sandwiches, socks, underwear or condoms; other.

Some homeless people choose the streets over shelters for compelling reasons. Most suffer from mental illness, addiction or both. Or they might be felons who can't find steady work to pay the rent, sex offenders who can't secure work or housing or, like Frankie, suffer from cognitive disabilities.

The dead man couldn't have been Frankie because Frankie doesn't live under a bridge. He squats under a stairwell.

According to the street outreach team, 21-year-old Frankie's cognitive disabilities probably don't preclude him from working -- but good luck finding someone patient enough to work with him.

He fled his home to avoid Chicago's gangs. Frankie is really sweet and respectful, but laypeople are often put off by his habit of dressing goth and toting around a stuffed dragon.

This morning his pregnant girlfriend slept with him on blankets edged on all sides by fragrant trash. We didn't wake them, but an outreach worker scanned the ground for the card he left on his last visit.

So this particular deceased man probably isn't Frankie and probably isn't one of the young adults I talked to at Anthony House, Lighthouse Youth Services' day drop-in center for 18- to 26-year-old youth. I doubt it's the funny young drunk with arresting eyes who took \$4 off me on Short Vine toward that day's \$12 methadone dose, he said.

It's probably not one of the Over-the-Rhine prostitutes I saw the Lighthouse street outreach team draw in with free condoms and ply with business cards offering assistance.

I asked the outreach workers: How do you keep from getting depressed? Exercise, one said quickly.

"I think if I wasn't doing something about it, I'd be more depressed. I really like most of the people. I like seeing them, having a friendly chat."

And the people we chatted up -- prostitutes, pimps, adults just now waking up, kids out for a good time in a bad place -- were surprisingly receptive.

As we rolled around in a white van emblazoned on three sides with "Lighthouse Youth Services Street Outreach," a beater pulled parallel at a red light. The driver on her cell phone exclaimed, "Oh look, it's the Lighthouse van! Lighthouse be steppin' it up, then."

One of the street outreach team said, "That just made my day." It was 11 p.m.

CONTACT STEPHANIE DUNLAP: letters(at)citybeat.com. Her column appears here the second issue of each month.

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