


No one deserves to end in a dumpster

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Twelve years ago, a homeless man, named Clayton Schroeder, died on a downtown Green Bay porch in the cold of winter. His death ultimately led to the formation of St. John the Evangelist Homeless Shelter.

Last week, on May 24, another homeless man, Thomas Worth, 55, died after taking shelter from a cold spring rain in a Green Bay dumpster.

"This is the underside of life in Green Bay," said Tony Pichler, who volunteers with StreetLights ministry. He knew Tom Worth.

Streetlights provides a caring presence in at-risk neighborhoods of Green Bay and hosts summer block parties attended by up to 400 low-income people.

"Most people aren't aware of the fact that people live in dumpsters, or in abandoned warehouses ... but the reality is there," Pichler said.

The Brown County Homeless and Housing Coalition (BCHHC) reported that, in 2016, 14 people were living on Green Bay's streets Jan. 26 — the night of their annual count. That count didn't include those in shelters. (St. John's was home to 93 people that January night.)

Last year, Tom Worth had housing, but hard times hit last fall. He stayed at St. John's this past winter. However, the shelter only has a city permit to be open 180 days, so it closed for the season April 30. And Tom was on the streets.

Alexia Wood, executive director of St. John's, said shelter staff had seen Tom Worth on Tuesday, May 23. The shelter has Tuesday drop-in hours all year, offering services, showers and laundry facilities.

"Tom was a quiet man," she told The Compass. "He fell on hard times. The stereotype that many people would have as to why he was homeless, or why he would fall asleep in a dumpster, quite frankly didn't fit him."

Wood noted that at least four homeless people died on Green Bay's streets in the past few months: one had sought shelter in a semi-trailer truck, another in a parking garage, a third died in a residential garage.

"Tom represents the shadow of so many members of our St. John's family, and the reality and the plight that they face daily," said Wood, shortly after she and a few of her staff gathered beside that dumpster for an impromptu memorial to Tom.

"He was a member of our family," she said. "We are feeling the loss of a loved one. And we know that it was preventable."

Tom Worth was a person, with a name and face, hopes and dreams. Like anyone can, he fell on bad times. We don't know all about Tom's life, but we do know how close many are to a similar situation. The 2016 United Way ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) report showed 42 percent of Wisconsin households on the edge of financial insecurity. That means they're one lost job or medical emergency away from disaster.

St. John's shelter exists to help those who struggle with issues that keep them out of other shelters or scarce, low-income housing. Some guests have mental health issues or physical disabilities; others suffer from addiction, or have criminal records.

At this point, someone might say, "There you go; it's their own fault. They should just pull themselves together."

Blaming the poor for their problems is a common reaction.

The BCHHC's 2016 collaborative report addressed this attitude: "The image of the person 'sitting on welfare' for many years or moving to the Brown County area to take advantage of our unique abundant resources is not something our agencies could substantiate." (There are 40 local agencies in the BCCHC, including St. John's and the Green Bay Police.)

When St. John's shelter opened in 2007, Sacred Heart Fr. Guy Blair was pastor at St. John the Evangelist Parish. In 2007, as controversy about the shelter's location flared, Fr. Blair told *The Compass*, "Homeless people are not just a problem to be solved. They do have some rights."

He added something that emphasizes how close at risk anyone can be.

"The reason I personally got into this," he said, "is that my mother and father were homeless. ... My point is that we look at the homeless and we think that they are all shuffle butts, that they are all lazy, that they are all irresponsible. But I wonder how many of our senior citizens, older people, others, just simply can no longer afford to live."

That's what happened to a man named Clayton Schroeder 12 years ago. It happened to a man named Tom Worth this May. And it will happen again. Unless we all do more — and, yes, some do so very much — to see the homeless as people with names and rights. They have hopes and dreams that we, as Christ's disciples, can and should find ways to make reality. No one deserves their reality to end in a dumpster.

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