

# Ceremony mourns homeless who died

Homeless - 2000  
12-21-11  
With 500-plus deaths in 12 years, organizers mark grim milestone

By JASON HOPPIN

jhoppin@santacruzsentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ — One of the first was Stephen Parrish, a 54-year-old man sleeping in a trash bin near Harvey West Park when its contents were emptied into a truck and taken to a North Coast dump.

In the days following his death by crushing, Parrish's 30-year-old daughter said her dad lived with drug and alcohol problems, and the two hadn't spoken in 25 years.

The youngest was 24-year-old Salvador Aguilar, a Santa Cruz native known as Sal. He was found Oct. 30 by passers-by at Friendship Garden, and while he died of a heroin overdose, an autopsy showed a variety of health problems attributable to substance abuse.



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Gayla Faahs remembers her best friend Connie Brown, who died this year.

SEE HOMELESS ON B4

## HOMELESS

Continued from B1

The oldest was Richard Ortiz, 66, of natural causes, though he also had extensive health problems. He was found Feb. 4 on a patch of grass along Ocean Street, near the entrance to Highway 17, and was declared indigent.

In 2011, 24 homeless people have died on local streets. On Tuesday, they were remembered by many, some of whom knew them, some of whom didn't. Mourners spoke affectionately and haltingly, often with tears in their eyes, of "Mama Connie" or "Johnny the Breeze."

They spoke at the Santa Cruz Homeless Services Center on Coral Street, in a threadbare dining hall decorated with Tibetan prayer flags and four strips of flypaper dangling in a corner. The only real adornments were votive candles floating in several large bowls and a bouquet of white flowers, rising from a tall and slender vase.

Santa Cruz has performed this solemn ritual since 1999. It coincides with similar ceremonies nationwide, and is timed near the winter solstice, the longest night of the year.

In a community with a

## ON THE NET

To hear an audio clip of the ceremony, visit [www.santacruzsentinel.com](http://www.santacruzsentinel.com)

high homeless population and with the average age of a homeless person's street death a mere 49, the numbers have added up. Over the last dozen years, more than 500 people died on the streets or after long periods of homelessness.

"I feel 100 percent certain we haven't caught every one," said Matt Nathanson, a public health nurse with the Homeless Persons Health Project who tracks the deaths.

Among an often overlooked slice of the community, the deaths are a tragedy that continues to unfold. Many struggle with substance abuse or mental illness. The vast majority were white, male and died in the city of Santa Cruz, and most were older than age 50.

Ten died of overdoses, three of chronic alcoholism, two of cardiovascular disease, two of cancer and several more of other causes. One was a homicide victim, and two were suicides.

"June was my suicide attempt," said a woman who rose to speak during Tues-



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

The Rev. Joel Miller of Calvary Episcopal Church speaks to gathering at Santa Cruz Homeless Services Center memorializing homeless who have died in 2011.

day's ceremony. "Luckily it was unsuccessful. Nov. 20 was my fiancé's suicide attempt. It was successful."

Part of the ritual includes printing the names of the deceased — the 24, plus others who died in their homes after being homeless, along with a woman who died on Christmas Eve in 2010, after last year's ceremony — on Tibetan prayer flags. Previous years' flags are on display in the basement of the County Governmental Center at 701 Ocean St.

County estimates on the number of homeless people on any given day vary widely, but one recent count put the number at more than 2,700. Finding ways to house and care for the homeless is a near-constant endeavor, and often a political flash-

point.

But politics were put aside Tuesday. The Rev. Joel Miller of Calvary Episcopal Church, who often ministers to the homeless population, said their lives should be celebrated.

"Life is something wonderful to behold. And in our liturgy, at the burial of an individual, we make those amazing words: Hallalujah, hallelujah, hallelujah," Miller said. "Even in the grave we make our song, hallelujah. Today we remember and we celebrate these 38 lives."

Monica Martinez, executive director of the Homeless Services Center, echoed those words.

"Today, we're celebrating them," Martinez said. "They're not forgotten today."