

SERVICE REMEMBERS DEATHS OF HOMELESS

Homeless - 2000

12-19-14



The Homeless Services Center annual memorial for homeless who died during the past year drew a standing-room-only crowd Thursday. PHOTOS BY DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Report details 2014 toll in Santa Cruz County

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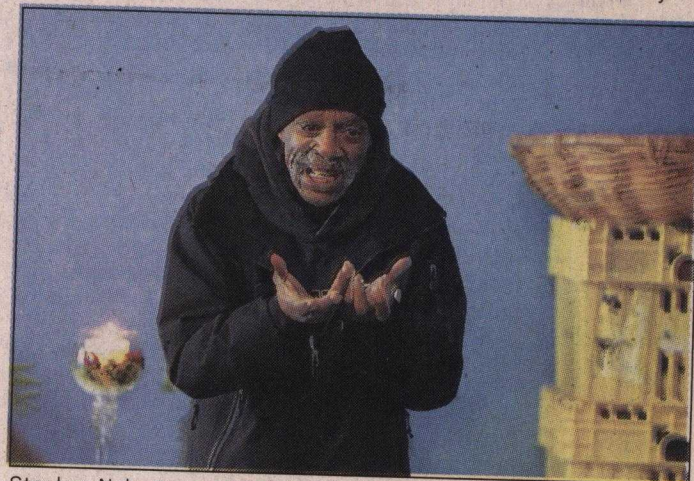
SANTA CRUZ » Standing in front of a string of dozens of colored flags bearing the names of those who died homeless locally in 2014, Jeanne Underwood nearly broke into tears Thursday morning.

Underwood, who described herself as chronically homeless to group of more than 100 people gathered for the 16th Annual Homeless Memorial at the Homeless Services Center, said she, too, could have become a name on the wall, after her failed suicide in February.

"I'm so glad that I didn't succeed, because as I'm rising above my circumstances," Underwood said. "I really want to get into the ministry of helping homeless people. I'm not sure how that's going to happen, but I know that's one of the main reasons I'm still here today."

In a Homeless Persons' Health Project report offered at the service by county public health nurse Matt Nathanson, a reported 38 people died while homeless in Santa Cruz County in 2014. The youngest was 15, the oldest 74. The number of deaths mirrored last year's count, according to the report.

"The average age of the people who died is about 51 and a half. That's pretty consistent over the past 10 years," Nathanson said. "For comparison, I looked up online the latest statistics in the U.S. of the average age of people dying. It's 78.7 years old. So, we're talking a 28-year difference."



Stephen Nelson, once homeless himself, speaks of caring for the less fortunate at Thursday's memorial for homeless who died during the past year.

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➕ To see a short video of the annual Homeless Memorial service Thursday morning, visit santacruzsentinel.com and click on this story.

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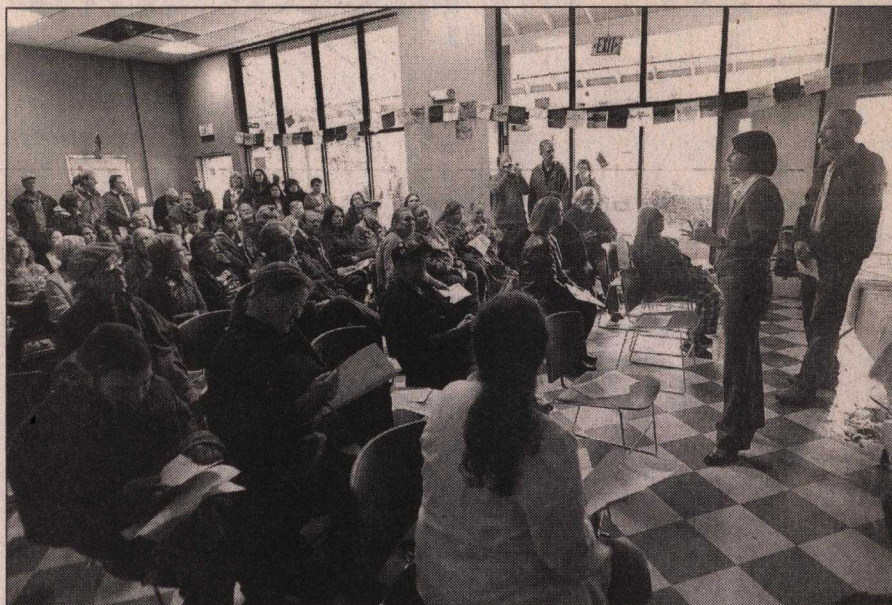
Nathanson, becoming emotional, said that one of those who died this year was a woman named Alison who rolled down the hillside from her camp and drowned in a body of water.

"Sometimes the spin in the world is that homeless people are dangerous," Nathanson said. "I think homelessness is dangerous."

The Circle Church's the Rev. Steve DeFields-Gambrel, who is moving out of state soon, said he has changed in the past 11 years he has lived in Santa Cruz, often with the help of homeless people he has met.

"We're here to bear witness that these folks whose flags are flying made a difference, made an impact," DeFields-Gambrel said. "These folks have taught me to see the face of God in their eyes."

The homeless memo-



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Homeless Services Center director Jannan Thomas and Santa Cruz Mayor Don Lane address the memorial gathering Thursday.

rial has been ongoing since 1999, a time span in which more than 650 deaths have been recorded, officials said. Santa Cruz Mayor Don Lane and Police Chief Kevin Vogel attended the 90-min-

ute ceremony.

Stephen Nelson, a Homeless Services Center campus community service coordinator and formerly homeless man, said this year was a particularly difficult one

for him, in terms of losing friends and acquaintances.

"They just wanted their life," Nelson said. "We cared about them up front. They may not have been all right, but they weren't all wrong."