

Burned to death for being homeless

The brazen Oct. 9 street-murder of John Robert McGraham provokes sadness and indignation from the community.

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Is there a more atrocious modern-day crime than to burn another human being to death?

Some witnesses say John Robert McGraham tried to run away from his torturer after gasoline was poured over his body and ignited as he sat on the sidewalk the warm evening of Oct. 9. But the 55-year-old homeless man, who had been living on the streets of L.A. for decades, didn't get far with his raggedy clothes on fire. And when people from the working-class immigrant neighborhood near Third and Berendo streets rushed to save him, his body was already critically burned.

The following Sunday evening, more than 200 people showed up at the somewhat seedy corner for an impromptu memorial to the shaggy, bearded, smelly down-and-outer, who still managed to maintain a dignified quiet manner.

One young woman asked those around her if they remembered his piercing blue eyes. A local convenience store owner reported that "Mr. John" never paid a penny less for anything he bought. Another woman said he was loved. Many in the sidewalk crowd that spilled into the street simply cried.

The second-youngest of six kids, McGraham grew up in Cypress Park. He loved comic books that featured superheroes, and would run through the house with a towel tied around his neck pretending, like so many boys his age, to be The Man of Steel.

Somewhere along the line, however, John became the lost child, according to older sister Sharon McGraham. When he was in his early 20s, she helped him land a job at the classy Biltmore Hotel downtown. Later he was a bellhop at the Ambassador Hotel on Wilshire Boulevard. But he lost that job after becoming depressed over a failed romance.

As the depression got worse, he started disappearing for days, spending nights on the street. For awhile he lived with his mother until they argued and she asked him to leave. So it was back to the streets, at first near Sixth Street and Vermont Avenue. In the mid-1990s, after being stabbed, he wound up in Los Angeles County-USC Medical Center with a punctured lung. Then the troubled urban nomad seemed to settle on Third Street, where he would be attacked again, this time fatally.

"I wish people better understood the mental turmoil a human being can go through that puts and keeps them in such a place that they can't seem to get out," another sister, Susanne McGraham-Paisley, e-mailed the Los Angeles Times. "Our family has tried for many, many years to help him, but it seemed beyond our reach."

She went on to say her siblings, who no longer lived in the Los Angeles area, always brought John food, clothes and money at Christmas, and how she and her then-husband and their two children would visit him on holidays. But McGraham-Paisley also stressed that the families of homeless are "often helpless" to help their mentally ill loved ones. She and her sister and ex-husband had contacted many social service agencies over the years, to no avail.

"I hope the horrific crime against our brother will make people realize that homeless people are human, they do have family, they are cared for," she said.

Online 'Bumfights'

Tragically, John Robert McGraham's torture and death is not an aberration in American society today. Since 1999, when the National Coalition for the Homeless started tracking vicious hate crimes, there have been nearly 800 violent acts committed against homeless individuals in 235 cities in 45 states and Puerto Rico. More than 200 people have been killed.

In 2007, the attacks rose 13 percent over 2006 - from 142 to 160 -while the number of attacks resulting in death jumped 40 percent - from 20 to 28.

Most of the perpetrators were young men or boys, with almost two-thirds being youths between 13 and 19 years old. Boredom, for the "thrill" or "fun," because the victim was homeless and, probably most disturbing, "because we can" were given as reasons for the crimes.

Some attackers, who unashamedly filmed their assaults on cell phones or video cameras, reported they wanted to place them on websites promoting "Bumfighting." In July 2007, for instance, four teenage boys were arrested for attacks on at least eight homeless people living mostly in and around L.A.'s skid row. They admitted being influenced by "Bumfights" movies and planned to post their own urban violence videos online.

Florida led all states last year with 31 attacks on the homeless, followed by California with 22 attacks, Nevada with 14 and Ohio with 13.

"While some cities and states have taken positive steps to address hate crime and violence against homeless persons, many cities around the country continue to dehumanize homeless persons by enacting and enforcing laws that criminalize their homeless status," states the "Hate, Violence, and Death on Main Street USA, 2007" joint report by the homeless coalition and National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty.

"Many laws, such as those that restrict sleeping, sitting, storing property, and asking for money in public, send a message to society that homeless people are not human, do not deserve respect, and that attacks against them will not be taken seriously."

'Less than human'

"It tears you up," said Msgr. Gregory Cox, executive director of Catholic Charities of Los Angeles, about the death of John Robert McGraham. "It's a tragedy for anybody to lose their life, no matter how it happens. But for somebody to be burned to death, it deeply saddens you."

Although he didn't know McGraham, the priest and social worker said his death highlights how vulnerable homeless people living on the street really are in the United States - especially if they are suffering from mental illness.

He said it's "almost impossible" for family members or other concerned people to get a person off the street without that person's consent. And even if the homeless individual does want help, long-term programs that will take a mentally ill sufferer are few and far between in Los Angeles and across the nation.

"But there's a deeper issue of fiscal responsibility in California," Msgr. Cox stressed. "Even in economic good times, the state is still billions of dollars in deficit. So that when we have difficult times like now, what do we do? We cut \$4 million for the next fiscal year that's going to have an impact on homeless services and housing. As a result, reaching out to the most vulnerable in our population isn't even up for discussion."

In a statement issued the day after McGraham's death, Rebecca Isaacs of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority said the agency that addresses homelessness in the county was deeply disturbed by the attack.

"Too often, homeless individuals are treated as less than human in our society," she said. "It is this general devaluation of human life by many that encourages the few to commit such a senseless and brutal act against one of our most vulnerable citizens."

Isaacs reported that in LAHSA's most recent county-wide study of homelessness, 27 percent of homeless individuals said they had been assaulted since becoming homeless, while about 20 percent said they had been robbed.

"On any given night, 73,000 people in the City and County of Los Angeles experience homelessness," she noted. "We must redouble our efforts to fund and support effective solutions to end homelessness."

The Rev. Andy Bales, president of the Union Rescue Mission, was so moved by the Oct. 9 murder by fire that he is working with the producers of the TV show "America's Most Wanted" on a segment to track down the perpetrator or perpetrators.

"Because I have a 23-year history of trying to protect homeless folks from being beaten," he told The Tidings. "And this is kind of like the 2008 version of the decades-old tradition of what they called 'rolling drunks' 40 years ago. Only now it's scaled up to an atrocious, horrendous crime."

The skid row mission director said that he had heard of terrible incidences like this in Third World countries but never in the United States. A friend of the homeless advocate who knew John Robert McGraham well and had tried unsuccessfully to get him off the street, described him as a "sweet Teddy Bear" of a man. (At his street-side memorial, people placed Teddy Bears on the sidewalk along with votive candles.)

"Proverbs 24, 10-12 says if you see somebody staggering towards death, you have a duty to save life; and if you don't, you're going to be held accountable in the end," Rev. Bales observed. "I just had never seen that before. But it even encouraged me more that we've got to save these guys and rescue them from the streets before things like this happen because they're so vulnerable."