

Bill Died
Parish Diary
Fr. Peter Daly
July 12, 2012

Bill died. He was a victim of the terrible heat wave that swept much of the country this July. He was also a victim of his own demons.

Bill was a well known figure in our community, but ironically, no one really knew him well. He was homeless, partly by choice but mostly as a result of his mental illness. He tested the patience of nearly everyone in town, yet most people genuinely liked him. There are people like Bill in every community. They are beyond our help, but content with their lives.

I have encountered Bill in episodes for more than 15 years. Some years back, when he was living in a rent subsidized apartment in our parish, he wanted our church to help him pay for a brand new Chevrolet. It was a very nice car. I said no. We would help him with rent, but not a new car.

Bill had a voucher from the government that paid most of his rent. It is given to people who are mentally or physically disabled. But Bill did was a hoarder. He did not keep the apartment clean. Eventually the apartment complex evicted him for safety and health of the neighbors.

He moved into his car and put his stuff in storage. That began a long slow decline.

He was not shy about asking for help from people. He often parked himself outside of coffee shops or grocery stores and asked people to bring him something. Often he wanted a newspaper or a cup of coffee.

Several winters back during a terrible cold spell, our parish paid for Bill to stay in a motel for a couple of weeks. This gesture made us friends of a sort. He was very grateful, but he made a terrible mess out of the motel room. The motel told us that they would no longer accept sent by our church.

Since we could not use the motel, our parish started a program for the homeless in cold weather called "Safe Nights." Eventually more than 20 churches in our community opened their doors to the homeless for a week at a time in cold weather.

But Bill always refused to participate in Safe Nights. He did not like rules. He did not want to be regimented in any way.

One summer Bill asked us to help him clean out his two storage lockers. We sent the teenagers from our Catholic Heart Work Camp. When they opened the storage locker doors they were greeted with a terrible odor. There were bugs, vermin and rodents everywhere. Bill had thrown food into his storage lockers, along with his clothes and furniture. We closed the doors. Eventually the storage facility hired a hazardous materials company to dispose of the contents. Bill blamed us for the loss of his stuff. We realized just how disturbed he really was.

Bill lived in his car. Most days he could be seen sitting on portable seat somewhere near his car along the main highway through our town. He would wave at the passing traffic. People would honk. Almost everybody knew him.

Bill was an avid reader of the newspapers. He kept them in his car, which eventually was filled to the roof. He parked his car in various shopping center and parking lots at night. Tolerant land owners would let him stay for several months at a time. But eventually Bill always wore out his welcome.

Now he is gone to God. Surely such a troubled man will find some peace now. I hope he will.