

Hartford Courant.

Remembering a Man His Family Preferred To Forget

Susan Campbell

February 15, 2009

Rodney "Gary" Levesque was found dead in his Hartford apartment last month. He was 49, but he looked years older.

Alcohol and heroin will do that to you.

He died of cirrhosis, the evening of the day a doctor gave him six months to live. He was sad but took the news stoically. Then he went home to an apartment that Immaculate Conception Shelter & Housing Corp. and Shelter Plus Care had acquired for him, and he died.

Gary was one of 10 kids, but by dint of his rough life, the employees at Immaculate Conception Shelter on Park Street became his family. When a shelter worker called a family member to tell her of Gary's passing, she sighed and said she just couldn't deal with the loss.

So instead of blood kin, a shelter worker went through his few possessions: his scattered clothes, the cross he wore around his neck, the half-empty photo album of pictures of a younger, healthier Gary in a sun-dappled yard with various children — nieces? nephews? — on his lap.

As far as anyone knew, Gary never married, and he had no children. He might have believed in God. The cross he wore surely meant something. His Immaculate family decided to hold a memorial service for him, which would serve two purposes. A service would honor Gary, and it would reassure his fellows. Sharon L. Eastman, Immaculate's associate director, said that of all the challenges facing her clients, the scariest one is oblivion. They fear that they'll pass with no one taking note. So Immaculate's staff decided to take note of Gary.

They had Gary cremated, and they planned something simple, outside in the snow, which Gary would have liked.

But how to do that? Nine years ago, when Eastman came to Immaculate, Gary was already a longtime client. Unlike many of their clients, Gary never threatened to sue or call the [CIA](#), nor did he call the workers foul names. In fact, he was unfailingly polite, this man who'd burned bridges with his kin. Somehow, in the shelter, he could be that sweet guy from before the drink and drugs.

What do you say about such a guy? How do you give that guy a proper sendoff?

Eastman and others put the word out: Come remember Gary. So a few minutes before 1 on a bleak and cold Friday afternoon, a shivering group of shelter workers, clients and neighbors formed a ragged circle in the side yard of the brick shelter. Bradford Howard Jr. of Restoration Temple Deliverance Mission Churches Inc. walked over on his lunch hour from his job at Charter Oak Health Center to say a few words. Eastman handed out cut flowers, and a tall man stood with his nose buried in a white aster throughout the short service.

Gary, said Howard, as frost coated his words, touched lives, and those gathered nodded. Gary tried to speak Spanish, but he couldn't, a woman said. Gary had a nice smile, said another. It's strange to drive into the parking lot and not see him, said Eastman.

And then Erin Dufresne, director of the shelter's housing program, reached into a long black box and sprinkled some of Gary's ashes into the snow, while Howard tossed some torn petals on top. They'll sprinkle the rest later, in the spring.