



# Looking back from the ledge

Candles fill the table at the memorial for Kirk Reeves, who died Nov. 6 from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. He was among dozens of people who experienced homelessness last year whose final address was listed as "domicile unknown." PHOTO BY ROBERT BRITT

*The second annual report on homeless deaths shines a light on the toll taken by the streets*

*"Things are just getting worse and worse.  
No way to get back on my feet,"*  
— "Working" Kirk Reeves

**BY JOANNE ZUHL**  
STAFF WRITER

He was one of a kind — the man in the white tuxedo and Mickey Mouse ears, playing his trumpet from a corner perch on the Hawthorne Bridge.

But on Nov. 6, "Working" Kirk Reeves became one in a list of Multnomah County's "domicile unknowns."

In its second annual report on homeless deaths released May 10, Multnomah County announced there were 56 such deaths in the 2012, more than one a week, according to the Oregon State Medical Examiner's Office. Ten of them, like Reeves, took their own lives.

Last fall, Reeves wrote publicly about his struggles with homelessness and depression, as well as his hopes in the few weeks before he took his own life. But whereas Reeves was a local celebrity, so many others on the list perished in social anonymity.

The title of the Medical Examiner's, "Domicile Unknown," refers to the category on death records added in December 2010. The figures begin to give a picture of how many people experiencing homelessness die on the streets. The number is up compared to 2011, when 47 deaths were recorded.

But the figure is still just a snapshot, a subcategory of mortality among the thousands of people who experience homelessness every night in Multnomah County, and the estimated 16,000 who will experience a period of homelessness here in the course of a given year.

"It's a reflection on us as a community on how we value people's lives," says Multnomah County Commissioner Deborah Kafoury, who along with Street Roots spearheaded the report. "Just because someone is sick, or has a mental illness, or a drug addiction, that doesn't mean they're any less of a person. The fact is that each one of these deaths was preventable. It's incumbent upon us to do something about that."

"Domicile Unknown" has been a joint project between Multnomah County and Street Roots. Executive Director Israel Bayer says one of the reasons Street Roots found it important to advocate for and coauthor this report was to understand the real implications experiencing homelessness has on a person's health.

"Fifty-six people died homeless on the streets last year, many of whom died absolutely horrible deaths, by burning to death, drowning, suicide, etcetera," Bayer says. "It's up to the entire community to do better."

The deaths were classified as natural, accident, suicide, homicide or undetermined. The most common cause of accidental death is from trauma and intoxication. The trauma cases included drowning, burns and hypothermia. Among the cases of intoxications, Heroin was the most common substance that caused death, followed by alcohol, methamphetamine, cocaine and oxycodone. Here are a few more details on the numbers:

- The ages of those who died were between 21 and 72, with the average age of death being 45. The average life expectancy in Multnomah County is 71.

- The majority, 48 out of the 56, were male.

- 30 of the deaths were categorized as accidental, including trauma and intoxications.

- 14 of the deaths were categorized as natural, including complications from alcohol use and health conditions.

"What stands out is the preventable nature of the majority of the deaths," said Paul Lewis, deputy health officer for Multnomah, Clackamas and Washington counties. "That, and the young age. 45 is too young."

Lewis worked with the Medical Examiner's office in compiling the figures and determining who met the definition of