



**James Michael Bostick**  
May 15, 1973 - June 5, 2015

# 'We cannot become numb to what's happening'

James Michael Bostick died of a heroin overdose on June 5 in Portland's Union Station downtown.

At 42 years old, James had lived a hard life. Holding back tears, Krista Campbell, James' mother, talked to me by phone from her home in Florida. Her son had been battling addiction and homelessness for more than 13 years, she said. "Some people might see him as just another homeless junkie that died, but he was an incredible man. He had an incredible heart. He was my precious baby.

"I suppose in the back of my mind I had been expecting the call for years," said Krista. "I prayed for him every single day. When the call came, nothing I've been through in my life prepared me for what's happened. I've lived a hard life. Saying that, I've lost my son. My dear son."

James left behind a mother, a brother and three daughters ages 26, 25 and 14.

There's nothing that can prepare one for that kind of conversation. All you can do is listen and provide support. As I held back tears of my own, not having any real answers, we talked for nearly an hour. I listened to Krista laugh and cry, telling me countless stories about James, sometimes pausing to tell me she

couldn't believe he was gone. She told me about his bright blue eyes and beautiful smile. She told me that he was a kind and comforting man that loved Jesus.

Like many people in the United States, Krista said she didn't understand the mental health issues her son faced. "Demons grabbed hold of my son years ago and I felt helpless to help. I didn't know anything about depression. I didn't know he was bipolar, then eventually paranoid schizophrenic. I found out about other mental disorders James was facing after I Googled all the medication found in his backpack after his death. There were voices in his head that wouldn't leave him alone. Addiction took hold of his life and held him until his very last breath. Then, it was God that took him home."

Unfortunately, Krista wasn't the first parent I've talked to after finding out their child died on the streets. Between trying to navigate the politics of homelessness and housing, supporting Street Roots staff and vendors, fundraising and looming newspaper deadlines — I hadn't really gotten any time to myself this week. Not long after the call, I took a short walk and lost it.

"Pull it together, Israel," I told myself. You have a column to write.

According to the Fourth Annual Domicile Unknown report co-authored by Street Roots, the Multnomah County Health Department and the Medical Examiner's office, 56 people died while experiencing homelessness in 2014. That's more than a person each week. Fourteen people experiencing homelessness died from natural

causes, 27 by accident (including overdose), 6 by suicide, 1 by homicide and 4 had unknown causes of death, according to the Medical Examiner.

To say that this is unacceptable is an understatement. How exactly does one advocate to the general public, to newspaper reporters and editorial boards to understand the scope of why housing really matters in our community?

In the last four years in Multnomah County, 191 people have died literally on the streets while experiencing homelessness. The average age at the time of death was around 45 years. Saying that, we recognize that the number is an undercount, understanding that many more people experiencing homelessness die in emergency rooms through the county.

The average age at the time of death was around 45 years. It's beyond tragic.

I would like to think 56 people didn't die in vain on the streets of Multnomah County this year. Knowing that, how can anyone doubt that the issue of housing and homelessness is an emergency?

The annual report underscores the need to continue to increase investments in housing, addiction and mental health services.

It should go without saying that now more than ever we need leadership on the issue of housing and homelessness in our community.

"We cannot become numb to what's happening to so many people in our community," said County Chair Deborah Kafoury. "We have to stand up as a community and say, 'Enough is enough.' This report proves this issue of housing is a matter of life and death."

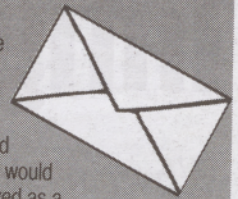
"What more can this grieving mother do to share her precious child with you so that you understand the man he truly was," Krista said. "Thank you for taking the time to let me introduce this incredible man, my son, to you. Thank you for wanting to do something, anything, to make people working with homeless addicts understand that most of them are more than castaways, they are someone's loving family member. We, the average people, do not know how to deal with addiction and with mental disorders. We feel stricken with fear for our suffering family members. We feel disgust in ourselves for not doing something when we aren't equipped to."

Krista also told me that when first responders found James, his body was still warm and they tried to resuscitate him. She wanted me to send a heartfelt thanks to all of the police and firefighters that work to save people's lives every day.

Before getting off the phone with Krista, I told her I would do my best to remember James every time I walked through the doors at Union Station and that Street Roots would deliver some flowers to the location where James died this week. We parted with heavy hearts.

## Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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## DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

Israel Bayer is the executive director of Street Roots. You can reach him at israel@streetroots.org or follow him on Twitter @israelbayer.