Not Enough Hate for a Hate Crime

A Salinas homeless man is murdered by being doused and set afire while sleeping in a doorway. Yet, this is not considered a "hate crime."

by Becky Johnson

Salinas, CA — He had been known in the area for the last ten years or so, said those who remembered him: Ken Rand, the owner of Baseballs, Etc., said he looked like “Santa Claus” with his long, white beard. None ever knew him to be violent or dangerous. All knew of his use of alcohol which the local merchants sold him.

A clerk at the Baskin-Robbins Ice Cream store on Laurel said he was very articulate, and didn’t fit the mold of what people expect from homeless people. Another witness said Thomas was college-educated and had once been a teacher. Most of those who had known him said he was a Vietnam veteran as well.

We hear people talk in derisive terms about homeless people: They are all a bunch of drug addicts and alcoholics. They are just sponging off others. Many of them are “homeless by choice.” The names — bums, derelicts, lazy, street scum, human detritus — have all been used to dehumanize homeless people. Such language, when used by those who are the leaders of a City, such as the owners of businesses, or members of the City Council, have the effect of justifying violence against homeless people.

And Charles Thomas, 56, of Salinas, California, was one of the “visible” homeless. His addiction to alcohol most likely ate up his social security check.

Sometime before 10:30 p.m., according to several press reports, Charles Thomas laid down to sleep behind Coastal Dental Care at 1244 N. Main Street in north Salinas. He didn’t use the shelter at “The Mission” for he was averse to its religious overtones.

According to Lt. Manuel Perrine of the Salinas Police Department, some person or persons doused Thomas with a flammable liquid, most likely gasoline, and set his body on fire. When police arrived, his lower body was in flames, badly charred, with pieces of flesh already hanging off it.

He was hospitalized at Santa Clara Valley Medical Center with third degree burns on 40 percent of his body, and, after living for a week in agony, he died.

On May 13, some flowers and an American flag were set beside the still charred building.

The National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) recently published a study of hate crimes against the homeless. Salinas does not appear on the list of the top 20 cities named for the highest incidence of hate crimes, but California is named the most lethal state for homeless people.

Local police can’t remember of a case of a homeless hate crime in the past few years in Salinas. Nor will this case likely be ruled a hate crime against homeless people. The Salinas Police Department reported they were actively pursuing an individual or individuals who, they believe, committed the crime. And since they at first claimed that a suspect was also homeless, this has not been ruled a hate crime against homeless people.

The NCH analyzed published news reports over a four-year period. They only counted assaults or deaths committed by non-homeless people against homeless people. Unless police officials and District Attorney’s offices stated that the cause of injury or death was motivated by hatred against homeless people, the statistic is ruled a crime statistic and not a hate crime statistic.

For instance, the NCH study found only six incidences of hate crimes against homeless people in Los Angeles over a four-year period. Since Los Angeles has a homeless population estimated at between 54,000 and 86,400, this almost certainly represents a serious undercount.

The Salinas case highlights why hate crimes against homeless people are undercounted. The death of Charles Thomas by being doused with gasoline and set afire does not qualify as a hate crime.

Nearby Santa Cruz, with six reported hate crimes against homeless people in a four-year period, ranks third in the nation for homeless hate crimes.

According to the Monterey Herald, Lt. Dan Perez says that investigators were following “some very promising leads.”