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70 homeless who have died honored at fundraiser

AWARENESS: The event began a drive for a mental health group.

MEGAN BAEZA
Anchorage Daily News
Staff

The names Judy Smith, Kenneth Wellington and Ned -Griest may not be familiar to most Anchorage residents. But to members of the Alaska Mental Health Consumer Web, they were peers, fellow travelers and friends. Smith, Wellington and -Griest were just three of nearly 70 names read as part of a celebration of life held Tuesday honoring homeless men and women who have died on the streets of Anchorage in the past years.

The celebration was also part of a fundraising effort to cover expenses.

"Some of our bills just can't be paid with the grants we receive and we need to have some unrestricted money to stay afloat," said Donn Griffith, the organization's executive director. "This was the first event we tried like this, and we had a little success, enough to cover some of the more pressing matters, and we're looking to do another fundraiser sometime in November."

The Web is one of Anchorage's largest drop-in centers that deal with individuals facing mental health disabilities, substance abuse issues and homelessness. The organization's mission is to provide peer support, resource development and consumer-directed programs that help people improve their lives.

"The Web is an engagement center and we provide access to the Internet, drug and alcohol support groups and brown bag speakers to our users, all of whom have some degree of a mental disability," Griffith said. He estimates the center sees between 750 and 1,000 visitors each month.

"One of the problems we face as a community is that we tend to ignore the homeless population. We see them and we keep on driving -- we think one day we'll wake up and the problem will be gone, but it won't," Griffith said. "One of the goals of the Web is to get the public to see our clients as people, just like them. They're just like anyone else and can do great things if given the opportunity."

Entertainment was provided by the Sleeping Lady Drum Group and attendees were treated to a spaghetti dinner. Diane Benson, Democratic candidate for Congress, was the guest speaker at the event.

After she spoke, Benson mingled with guests for part of the evening.

"Diane thinks it's important that she meets and talks with all people, not just the ones in the know or who might vote," said Benson's campaign manager, Kris Pierce. "She listened to their stories and celebrated their successes with them. It's something every public official should do -- spend a little time with every citizen they represent."

The Web, at 1248 Gambell St., is a nonprofit organization and is currently conducting a winter clothing drive. Its needs include warm coats, hats, gloves and scarves, as well as cash donations for bills and other expenses. For more information, call 222-2980.

Daily News reporter Megan **Baeza** can be reached at mbaeza@adn.com.

Illustration:

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BILL ROTH / Anchorage Daily News

Donn Griffith, executive director of the Alaska Mental Health Web, speaks during a celebration of life Tuesday to raise awareness about homelessness and mental health. The resource center is now conducting a winter clothing drive.

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