STARK PHOTOS OF HOMELESS DEATH SITES AT OUT NORTH

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WHERE CHARLENE SHUGAK, 17, DIED: Died April 12, 2010. Found in Russian Jack Springs Park ball field.—Death due to hypothermia, probably compounded by drinking may have impaired her judgment on weather conditions. Photo by Dirk Spennemann.

Dirk Spennemann came to Alaska to research World War II weaponry, was here helping the National Park Service inventory and assess the condition of artifacts on Kiska Island, the scene of significant bases for both the Japanese and the Allies during the war. He was struck by a map published in the Daily News that showed the locations where homeless men and women had died on the street in parkland camps.

He resolved to make a series of photos of the sites. Using a modern digital camera and a WWII era aerial camera, originally used for taking high-altitude shots of enemy positions, he shot digital images through the viewfinder of the aerial camera, which had cross-hairs and a positioning ball that resembles a rifle sight.

Spennemann's series, "Dying on the Streets: A Photoseasy of Homeless Deaths in Anchorage, 2010," is now on display at Out North Gallery, 3800 DeBarr Rd. It includes 28 images. Some pinpoint the places where 19 individuals died between May 7, 2009 and April 18, 2010. Others captures some of the atmosphere around those areas — park signage, warnings against overnight camping or alcohol possession, etc.

Spennemann has attempted to make the images stark and dramatic. The viewfinder distorts the focus on the edges. Most were taken over a five hour period on a single cold, overcast April day. Only one shows a face — that of a peace officer gassing up his cruiser. In one instance, Spennemann put off taking a picture until children playing at the site had gone away.

In addition to the photographs, the names of the deceased, their date and cause of death (alcohol is a recurrent factor), are presented on a wall along with the added names of homeless people who have died in Anchorage since the pictures were taken.

Anchorage is not notable for its numbers of homeless, Spennemann said. Many cities have similar populations living on the street. But the cold climate sharply raises the percentage of fatalities among that population, he said.

"For a visitor, such a death rate is shocking," he writes in his artist's statement. "The topology of death on the streets is stark: park benches, scrub land, roadside ditches and even a rubbish compactor. Each case is depressing in itself, but cumulatively it creates a litany of a desolate urban wasteland."

http://community.adn.com/node/155443
A catalog is planned for the exhibit, which is open weekdays through Feb. 13. Admission is free, but
visitors are asked to drop off "lightly-used warm clothing" or non-perishable foods.

In conjunction with the show, Out North will present a "food event" for the homeless from 1-3 p.m. on
Saturday, Jan. 29. Volunteers are sought to make sandwiches and chill from 5-7 p.m. on Friday, Jan.

Regular readers of the Daily News will note that a separate series of photos by Marc Lester of each site
ran in May of 2010. That series appeared after Spennemann had conceived and executed his project.
Except for the subject, two were not connected and were developed separately.

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