Stark photos of homeless death sites on display

19 VICTIMS: Most pictures taken one day over five-hour period.

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Published: January 28th, 2011 12:58 AM
Last Modified: January 28th, 2011 01:37 AM

Dirk Spennemann came to Alaska to research World War II and found himself fixated on a very different and more contemporary conflict -- the deaths of homeless people in Anchorage.

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 resembling a rifle sight.

Spennemann's series, "Dying on the Streets: A Photoessay of Homeless Deaths in Anchorage, 2010," is now on display at Out North Gallery, 3800 DeBarr Road. It includes 28 images. Some pinpoint the places where 19 individuals died between May 7, 2009, and April 18, 2010, over a five-hour period.

Spennemann has attempted to make the images stark and dramatic. The viewfinder distorts the capture some of the atmosphere around those areas -- park signage, warnings against overnight parking, a "Dead End" street marker.

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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."

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 nonperishable foods.

In conjunction with the show, Out North will present a "food event" for the homeless from 1 to 3
p.m. on Saturday. Volunteers are sought to make sandwiches and chili from 5 to 7 p.m. today.
Call 289-8099, ext. 206.

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

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