Stark photos of homeless death sites on display

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Last spring the Australian archaeologist, a specialist in WWII weaponry, was helping the National Park Service inventory and assess the condition of artifacts on Kiska Island, the site of significant bases for both the Japanese and the Allies during the war. While in Anchorage, he was struck by a newspaper article about Genevieve Wilson, who was found dead in a car on April 18. The article included a map showing locations where Wilson and other homeless men and women had died over the previous year.

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, Dirk Spennemann 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.

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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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