

Deadly weather for homeless

Street people struggle through city's bone-chilling deep freeze

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For most Winnipeggers, jump-starting cars and fending off frostbite have likely been the biggest challenges of the bone-chilling deep freeze that has hit the city.

But for homeless people like Tony Crowe, the cold can be deadly -- as the obituary he keeps of his common-law wife, Laurie-Ann Richard, makes painfully clear.

Just a few weeks ago, Richard died of pneumonia. The couple had been surviving together on the street, alternating between sitting under a heat vent in an alleyway near Portage Avenue and Garry Street, and sleeping in heated parkades.

Aside from his clothing, the obit appears to be one of Crowe's only possessions.

"I loved her all my life, and I still love her. It's hard, but I'm coping," he said.

When Richard became sick, she didn't want to go to a hospital, but Crowe called an ambulance anyway. The ambulance picked Richard up from the alley they frequented. A few days later, she died in hospital.

Now, Crowe is back sitting under that vent in a thin denim jacket and runners nearly every day. He is a large man but he speaks quietly, slumped against a wall. His cousin and his cousin's wife are typically found a few feet from the same vent, refused shelter from the missions because they drink. Many local missions have strict dry policies.

Crowe said he and his wife had only been homeless since September, but they were familiar with the Downtown Winnipeg Business Improvement Zone (BIZ), whose outreach staff patrol 24 hours a day, providing people in alleyways, parking lots and under stairwells with rides to shelters where they can get food and clothing.

Lisa McIntyre, a special constable with the Downtown BIZ, sees people freezing all day long on her patrol.

"For the majority of the day, it's essentially a game of survival," she says. "When they wake up, they'll have breakfast at the mission, but then they've got an entire day of doing nothing where it's basically just hopping from place to place to try and keep warm."

To help the homeless like Crowe survive the cold, soup kitchens like Agape Table have extended their hours in the early morning and are doling out mittens, socks and scarves to those who show up without the basic necessities.

Crowe now sleeps alone in different heated parkades, preferring them to missions. "The people are very bad. You can smell them drinking antiseptic, Lysol and hairspray. It's really bad," he said.

Phillip Hart, like many other homeless people, spends much of his time at the Main Street Project shelter. But he has to move around to try to stay warm when the shelter closes for an hour in the morning.

Usually he walks down to the skywalks and tries to keep moving. "It's better than standing still... It's my life, so there's not much I can do but get used to it."

Monday, Hart had no mitts or toque and just a thin, black jacket. His eyebrows and beard were frosty from just a few minutes of standing outside. Walking from the mission to the heated walkways took almost 20 minutes.

David Traverse makes the same journey as Hart, except Traverse is 57 and has arthritis in his leg, hip and shoulder. Traverse requires a walker to get around, so getting from place to place takes a lot of time and, like Hart, he doesn't own a toque or scarf.

Traverse used to sleep outside all winter under a ramp at a nearby park but now sleeps at the Salvation Army. Recently, Traverse said, he fell and couldn't get up on his own, so staying outside would pose too much of a risk with his condition.

For some of the city's homeless, there are plans to get off the street and out of the cold for good. Crowe is planning on going back to Saskatchewan to stay with his mother in January. But both Traverse and Hart say they don't have any living family to bunk with. They plan to spend the rest of the winter -- and likely many in the future -- toughing it out.

teghan.beaudette@freepress.mb.ca