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Louisiana cemetery to take in unclaimed bodies

Brian Roewe | Apr. 28, 2012

Kim Boudreaux

Since his death in October 2009, the remains of Brian Walker have sat inside the coroner?s morgue in Lafayette, La. When he died, no one claimed his body. But on April 28, Walker will finally be put to rest, along with 90-plus other unclaimed persons.

Through a steadfast partnership stretching over two years between the coroner?s office, the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist and a Catholic Service worker, 95 unclaimed persons, as well as numerous fetuses, will receive a proper burial in the cathedral?s nearly two-century-old cemetery.

?It?s going to be just a really beautiful expression on the community?s part to our fellow brothers and sisters,? said Brady LeBlanc, the cemetery?s superintendent.

Bishop Michael Jarrell of Lafayette will preside over the public funeral, with numerous religious groups planning to attend. The bodies -- all cremated -- will be placed inside a columbarium that sits in the back of the cemetery near the bayou and beneath birch trees.

Plaques inscribed with each person?s name will line the columbarium, on top of which a statue of the sacred heart of Jesus sits, with the inscription below reading, ?Behold the heart which so loved man.?

?I think it?s a very fitting statement, that Christ, every heart, every human heart, belongs to him. Every soul is created in the image of God. To him, we will all return,? LeBlanc said.

Unclaimed bodies are a common occurrence for coroners across the country. Though no agency tracks the number of unclaimed bodies each year, news reports detail their frequency. In December, Los Angeles County buried more than 1,600 unclaimed people. In 2011, Oregon saw a 30 percent increase in unclaimed bodies cremated through its Indigent Burial Fund.

A 2009 independent investigation by The Oregonian revealed, for the most part, states manage the interment of unclaimed bodies, with methods widely varying. Fourteen states -- as well as the District of Columbia -- assume responsibility of covering burial costs, while the remaining 36, which includes Louisiana, assign the cost and

task to counties, townships or cities. Federal intervention occurs only when the unclaimed person was a veteran; then the Department of Veterans Affairs arranges a burial at a military cemetery.

The report also said all states require unclaimed bodies be first offered to medical schools or other educational institutions, a practice that has raised some controversy, most recently in Illinois.

Louisiana state law gives coroners custody of all unclaimed persons who die in their parish. They have authority to release remains to any interested party willing to claim them and provide interment.

?The way the law works is after a couple months, if they don?t claim them, then we can do what we think?s best,? said Keith Talamo, chief medical legal investigator of the Lafayette coroner?s office. ?And at that time, we just thought it was best to hold on to them, but every [civil] parish does different things.?

One of the bodies Talamo?s office held onto was Walker?s. Known as a talkative, helping person, he had been a former resident at the St. Joseph?s Shelter for Men in Lafayette. Well-liked by the Catholic Service Center staff, he eventually moved out of the men?s shelter and into his own apartment with their help.

That included the center?s executive director, Kim Boudreaux, who helped organize a service for their friend after he died of a heart condition little more than a year after his move. Only his memory was present, as they were told someone had claimed the body.

But nearly six months later, Boudreaux received a surprising phone call, informing her Walker?s body still remained at the coroner?s office.

?I was told at the time of his death that family or friends had claimed him and was taking care of the burial,? said Boudreaux, who began asking questions about her friend.

?My assumption was that if somebody goes unclaimed, that the coroner?s office either buried them, gave them a pauper?s funeral or cremated them,? she said. ?And I just started asking questions that I probably would have never thought to ask before.?

The coroner?s office confirmed to Boudreaux that Walker?s body had not been claimed, nor had it been cremated. When she asked why, she learned there were many unclaimed people ahead of him awaiting cremation. More so, the coroner had already cremated and stored more than 70 people, some dating back to the early 1980s.

?I was just very surprised,? she said. ?It was something that I had never thought of, or never considered.?

The revelation of the nearly hundred unclaimed bodies opened up a Pandora?s box for Boudreaux, who felt something had to be done. She asked the coroner if she could claim not only Walker?s body, but all the others as well.

?I?m afraid of death and this isn?t something that appeals to me at all, but I knew when hearing that there were all these people that were unclaimed, that I personally have a strong conviction that [all human life] has value and dignity and that we should bury our loved ones because of the value of human life,? she said.

?And as one of our staff members said, ?We bury our pets; we should be burying our neighbors.? ?

Boudreaux, a parishioner of St. John the Evangelist, asked her church if they could help put the nearly hundred souls to rest.

?We just felt that our obligation as a Catholic community [was] to reach out to our brothers and sisters and give

them a proper place of rest,? LeBlanc said. ?And you know, it?s a beautiful reminder at the dignity of life -- all life -- that if we honor the dead as temples of the Holy Spirit that they were, it will bring a greater sanctity to all human life.?

The cathedral parish paid for the columbarium, but has launched a donation campaign to offset the cost of the plaque engravings. Those donating receive two names of the deceased for whom they can pray.

So far, the campaign has raised $5,500; with no goal sum set, any additional funds will go toward the construction of additional columbaria for the poor and unclaimed, as the April service will be only the beginning.

The St. John cathedral parish plans to continue the service for years to come on All Souls? Day, for all those who have died and gone unclaimed in the past year. What had started as a search for a friend?s body has led to a commitment to remember many more, no matter their conditions during their final days.

For Walker, Boudreaux said her friend would have been most moved by knowing he wasn?t forgotten, ?that he?s remembered and that his life meant something to us.?

His plaque, along with many others, in the St. John?s cemetery will ensure just that.

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