

## Features

# Families of homeless torn between compassion, self-regard

By Teresa A. Parsons

Three or four years before Eric Eiger fell to his death from the Broad Street Bridge last month, his teenaged children began telling teachers and friends that their father was dead.

That lie was easier than explaining that he was a mentally disabled street person who frequented Rochester's libraries and homeless shelters. But to the ears of their mother, Abigail, the children's lie also contained the ring of truth.

"To us, he seemed like somebody who was already dead," she said. "He had a barrier of barbed wire around him, but it didn't have to be that way. It was his choice."

News of her husband's death would come as almost a relief to Margaret, the ex-wife of another chronic street person. She doesn't have a clue as to why her former spouse is slowly poisoning himself with alcohol, drugs and street life. All Margaret knows is that witnessing his cycle of self-abuse is more than she can bear.

"When he's sober, he's proud of himself and he wants everything. Then all of a sudden — zap? He doesn't care about anything but the booze," she said. "Sometimes I wish God would just take him. Then he'd stop hurting."

The kind of pain with which Margaret's husband and other homeless men and women live is on public display in the city's bus shelters, parks and downtown doorways. Yet they are surrounded by an aura of mystery. Passers-by who notice them wonder who they are, where they came from, and why they are on the street. "Where are their families?" people often ask.

In Eiger's case, the answer was "just across town." But aside from relatives and close friends, few of those who knew his family were aware of their connection to Eiger.

On the other hand, few of those who encountered Eiger at the public library or in the city's soup kitchens could conceive of the wiry man with the nervous mannerisms and untamable gray beard as a husband or father.

But pictures in the Eiger family scrapbook testify that he once was both. One photo shows him bathing his infant daughter. In another, he dandles a child on his knee, his head thrown back in a peal of laughter.

To see Eiger healthy and happy is to glimpse the wider and less obvious circle of pain and frustration that homeless people create among people who love them.

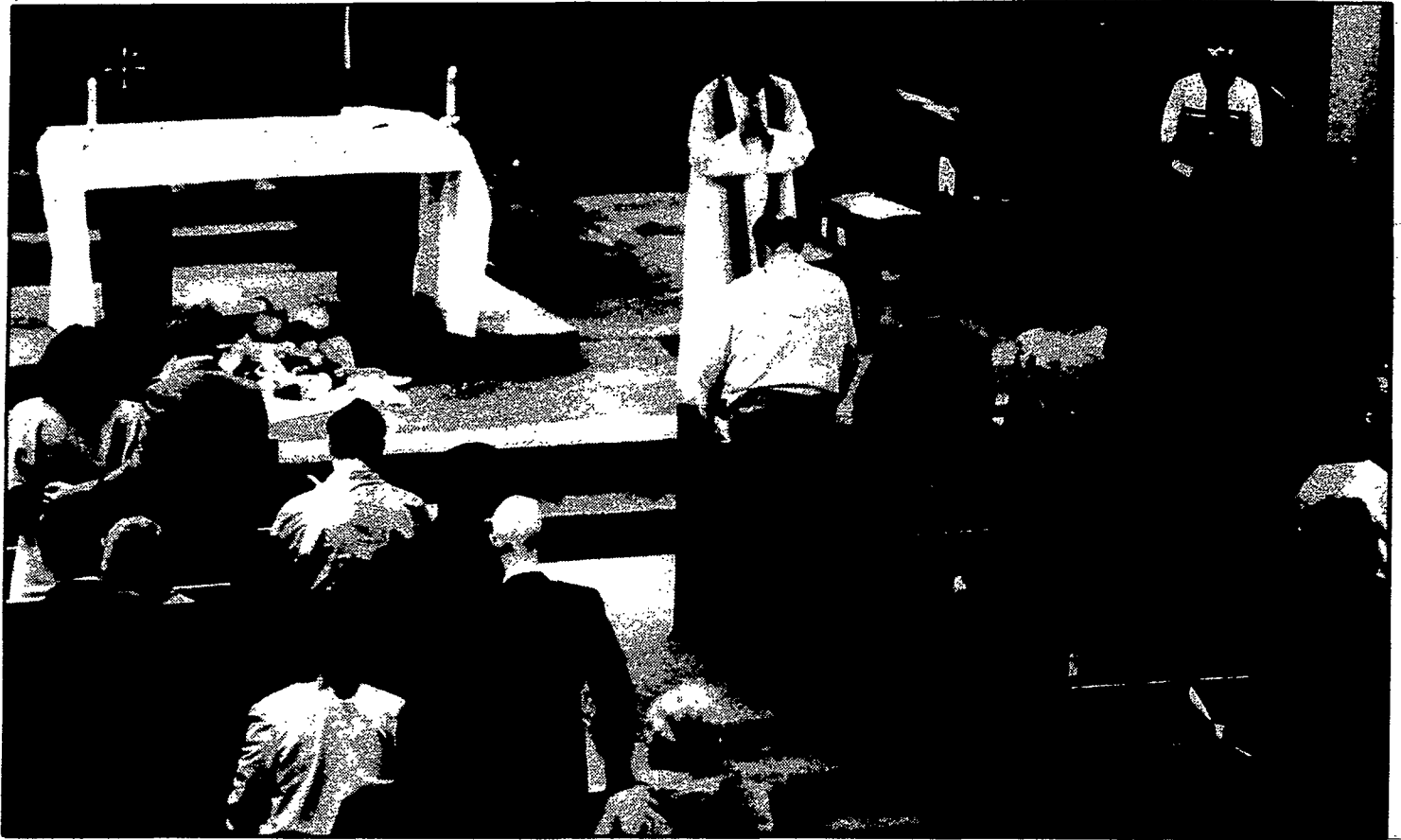
Eiger's wife, Abigail, was angry and bitter when she asked him to leave their home more than 10 years ago. Her husband was not dependent on drugs or alcohol, but instead struggled with mental illness. As his behavior grew increasingly bizarre and abusive, he refused to help support or care for their two young children.

"He wouldn't go for counseling," she recalled. "He wanted help, but he wanted it on his own conditions. One of those conditions was that he never wanted to give up the premise that he was perfectly OK."

Abigail's decision to end the relationship was sudden, but came on the heels of "three or four years" of hassles and arguments. "I knew right away that it was over," she said. "And I never shed a tear after that."

Nor did her two children, who were then toddlers. "Their only reaction was to say, 'It's so nice now that daddy's not here,'" she recalled.

Several years later, she realized that her husband was living on the street in Rochester. "I was always getting reports from people who



Bonnie Traflet/Courier-Journal

The cycles of pain and frustration that confront friends and families of homeless people end all too often with memorial services, such as Eric Eiger's pictured above, rather than with reconciliation.

saw him," she recalled.

She took to dropping off Christmas cookies at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality, where Eiger usually ate lunch. But she never attempted to see or contact him.

In fact, the only time she has seen him during the past decade was a brief encounter during their divorce proceedings. Nevertheless, Abigail suspects that Eiger was reasonably content with his life on the streets. "He had his needs met," she said. "He wanted to remain his own man to the very end, and he did."

From the moment she learned that he was living on the streets, however, part of Abigail began waiting for news that he had died. When she read in the newspaper that Eiger had fallen from a bridge while trying to find shelter in the city's abandoned subway bed, she felt sorrow at the pain he must have suffered, but little surprise. "I always knew he was going to die like that — that it was going to have something to do with a bridge," she said. In fact, a week earlier she had called police to inquire about the identity of another man who jumped from a Rochester bridge.

The bittersweet irony of Eiger's death, Abigail pointed out, was the speed and efficiency with which the Department of Social Services processed her application for funds to bury him.

In contrast, she recalled receiving forms several years ago that indicated Eiger had applied for benefits and had been refused. "That was a very bitter pill to take — that social services made it so easy to bury him, but that there was nothing for him while he was alive," she said.

Speaking from her personal experience as well as professional experience as a social worker, Abigail believes that attempts to reform chronically homeless people like Eiger are

wasted. "If there's one thing I've learned, it's that you can't force anyone to change if they don't want to," she said. "A lot of them don't want to change, and they shouldn't have to, as far as I'm concerned."

"Their needs are so small and so very basic. I think we should simply take care of those needs and forget about the rest," she said.

Margaret, on the other hand, believes that the substance-abuse treatment programs her husband has attended failed because they did not recognize the roots of his addictions and provide him with psychiatric treatment. "If you can't figure out why you're doing something, it seems to me that's what you need," she said. "He asked to see a psychiatrist, but the answer was always 'No, you need treatment.'"

As Abigail used to do, Margaret is unconsciously bracing for news of her husband's death, even though he has only lived on the streets sporadically for four years. Aside from an occasional job, he has survived by panhandling on the streets during the day and staying in shelters at night.

One by one, he has exhausted the patience of friends, family members and social workers who have tried to buttress his resolve to leave the streets behind. Yet time and time again, Margaret has taken him in when he was sick, fed him when he was penniless, helped him find jobs and treatment programs. She has watched the man she married begin to reappear, only to be crowded out once again by a stranger smelling of cheap wine and vomit. "Each time I'd tell him to get out of my life, he'd straighten up," she explained. "But every time he gets money in his pocket, he's got to have drink and pot (marijuana)."

"Then he leaves, but he never gets any further than down the street," she added.

Meanwhile, Margaret said, many of her

friends have grown impatient with her struggle. "They're scared I'll take him back again," she said.

Although Margaret is still torn between compassion and self-preservation, her determination to end the relationship has grown stronger since the couple's most recent attempt at reconciliation failed. In May, her husband, who had been sober for four months, spent their income-tax refund on a three-day party instead of the car for which they'd been saving. At that point, she decided that her life had been on hold long enough. "One day it just snaps inside. You get cold, and you say 'Get out,' and you mean it," she said.

Margaret questions whether her husband will survive the cycle of street life, this time around. Since he was diagnosed with diabetes last year, he's lost the sight in one eye and suffered several seizures. When he's drinking, he forgets to take his medication or even eat. "I saw him the other day, and it made me sick to my stomach," Margaret said. "It scares me, and it hurts to see how fast he's deteriorating."

She keeps busy — crocheting/reading the Bible, visiting with friends — in an effort to forget the pain. Her husband calls on the telephone frequently, begging her to see him. But he's growing less persuasive. "He tells me he'll change with his mouth, but his actions show something else," she said. "It's not that I minded helping him; it's that I was being used, and I knew it."

He also talks of buying a shotgun with the proceeds of a summer job — a prospect that frightens Margaret since he has threatened her with a gun in the past. "He's trying to get under my skin," she said. "I have no hate for him. I just wonder how can you be so stupid so many times?"

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