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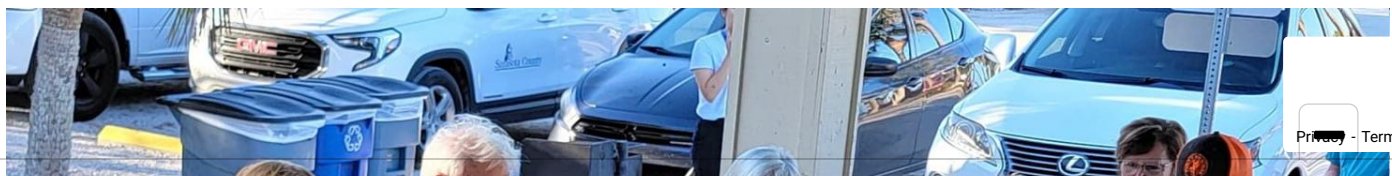
## Friends remember homeless campers

By ELAINE ALLEN-EMRICH STAFF WRITER

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Sooyeon Baek, Sarasota Department of Health educator, sits with Mindy Hazlett, executive director of On the Sun, and McCleralin Jr., Sarasota Department of Health educator and liaison for the Community Health Action Team in Englewood. PHOTO BY ELAINE ALLEN-EMRICH



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Community members and campers spent an evening together eating and remembering those who lived locally on the streets and in the woods and died this year.

sun PHOTOS BY ELAINE ALLEN-EMRICH

ENGLEWOOD — Theresa Depugh cried as she remembered her friend Jim Chitwood.


“Jim didn’t want to be homeless,” she said. “Jim fell on hard times and came to Jesus Loves You Ministry for help. He filed all of the paperwork, and we got him housing.”

The problem, Depugh said, is Chitwood, 57, didn’t make enough money. He needed a roommate to share the rent.

“The roommate never paid the rent and Jim lost the rental. He lost the roof over his head,” Depugh said. “Jim was kind. He never gave up. Even before he died, he fought hard.”

Depugh was one of a handful of speakers who shared memories of the area homeless campers who died in the past year. A vigil and community dinner was held at Indian Mound Park in Englewood.





It's a place where churches and nonprofits bring food every Tuesday night to feed campers a hot meal and give them personal hygiene items.

This is the second year the event was held by On the Spot Aid Inc., a nonprofit group, that supplies medical treatments to the homeless in Englewood, North Port, Port Charlotte and Punta Gorda.

Karen Moore volunteers at St. David's Jubilee Center in Englewood. That's where she met Kathleen Kozlik, who was living in her 2008 Saturn minivan with two cats after she was evicted in January. She died in a public parking lot in Englewood in July.

"She loved those cats. They were like her kids," Moore said.

When Kozlik became dehydrated, it was Ruth Hill from St. David's Jubilee Center who convinced the 61-year-old to go to Englewood Hospital. Kozlik didn't want to leave her cats alone in the car overnight. She died shortly after.

Local baker Connie Smoot created a memorial cake. The names of each person remembered was written on an edible heart and placed around the cake.

She teamed up with The Arctic Alligator Creamery & Bakery and served the cake and pumpkin spice ice cream.

The Rev. Don Hamsher of Living Hope Church prayed for the crowd and those who

died too soon. He said life is short and every moment counts.

“We have to make our lives count,” he said. “We have to lift each other up.”

Cynthia Voortman, who co-founded On the Spot Aid with Bonnie Saxman, sang as Casey Corby of the band Bittersweet Saloon accompanied her on guitar.

Voortman told the crowd that On the Spot Aid is a state distributor of Narcan, which is used to reverse an overdose if administered quickly. She announced the newer suicide prevention and harm-reduction lifeline is found by dialing 988.

She explained there’s a new Brave App. It’s designed to keep people safer from overdose by providing them with access to a community of people willing to give “remote supervision” at the very moment they are most at risk of overdose.

It can be used for the elderly or anyone who forgets they may have already taken their prescription drugs.

“One of our goals is to get local cities and counties’ commissioners to allow the use of fentanyl test strips,” Voortman said. “Fentanyl test strips can identify if there’s fentanyl in unregulated drugs. They can also be used to test IV drugs, pills and powders.”

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that’s about 50 times more potent than heroin. It’s used to tranquilize elephants. It’s also used for terminal patients. Others use fentanyl because it is cheap to manufacture.

But a small amount can create an overdose or death.



“People are accidentally overdosing because the street drugs they are buying are laced with fentanyl,” she said. “It’s become a huge problem. If these test strips were available, it would prevent overdoses. The local municipalities just have to approve of the use of them.”

Saxman said after Hurricane Ian, some of the unhoused are still in Red Cross and other area shelters. She said some are eating hot meals and sleeping on cots.

“It’s different right now,” she said. “There’s many people who are displaced. They don’t have power or a place to cook. There was a need before with the housing market explosion and lack of affordable rentals, but there’s a huge need coming after this hurricane.”

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