

## Homeless man had little, gave much

**Longtime Santa Rosa resident, killed on Hwy. 101, supported 2 Senegalese children**

By [GUY KOVNER](#)

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Published: Sunday, December 25, 2011 at 4:01 a.m.

Kevin Christopher Fitzgerald's life ended Saturday night on the cold asphalt of Highway 101 in Santa Rosa when the 57-year-old homeless man walked into the path of a southbound pickup truck.

The driver, traveling at 65 mph, swerved and tried to brake, but had no chance to miss Fitzgerald, the CHP said. The man had lived on the streets and been to local hospitals so often in the last 25 years that paramedics immediately recognized him.

Fitzgerald, the fifth homeless pedestrian killed by a vehicle this year in Santa Rosa, carried a secret that stunned most people who'd known the gentle, soft spoken man who suffered from mental illness all his adult life.

Surviving lately on about \$600 a month in disability payments, Fitzgerald sent \$56 a month to an international charity to support two 9-year-old children in the west African nation of Senegal.

"For a lot of people that's a drop in the bucket," said his older sister, Kathleen Fitzgerald-Orr of Santa Rosa. "It's like giving up a latte a day."

But for a man on the edge like Kevin Fitzgerald, donating nearly 10 percent of his income sometimes meant he had to "do without," his sister said.

"That's remarkable," said Nick Baker, program manager at Catholic Charities' Homeless Services Center, who knew Fitzgerald. "I've never heard of that before."

Fitzgerald, who started making the payments to ChildFund International in March 2009, was one of the 250,000 people whose donations support 13.5 million children in 31 nations.

"An amazing story," said Cynthia Price of ChildFund. "Someone who had so little chose to give to children halfway around the world."

Fitzgerald's funding provided three meals a day to an unrelated pair of Senegalese children, Waly and Bintou, who live in rural areas where families typically make \$800 a year, Price said.

For her brother, who never married or had children, the donations were a chance "to give to someone who had less than him," Fitzgerald-Orr said. "It was his one claim to doing something he felt was important."

Fitzgerald came by his charitable nature as a lifelong Roman Catholic, educated in parochial schools in the Buffalo, N.Y., area, who attended Mass at St. Rose Church in Santa Rosa when he was able.

"He didn't have a mean bone in his body," Fitzgerald-Orr said.



Living with memory loss

**Introducing the Enhanced Memories Program**



**For Individuals with Memory Impairment**

- ♥ Residential
- ♥ Respite and Day Club Services
- ♥ Brain Gym ♥ Nutrition,
- ♥ Stress Reduction
- and Social Support Guidance

For more information  
please call **707 578-8360**  
or visit  
[www.primrosealz.com](http://www.primrosealz.com)



**click for more info >>>**

Fitzgerald was badly injured in an assault on the street, and Fitzgerald-Orr said she and her sisters -- Linda Trowbridge of Santa Rosa and Becky Kough of Eureka -- feared for his safety.

Whenever Fitzgerald was arrested and jailed, they were relieved to know that he was temporarily in a safe place.

Baker said he knew Fitzgerald as one of chronically homeless men who'd drop by the homeless center on Morgan Street to get out of the cold, get a cup of coffee or sign up for a night at Sam Jones Hall, a shelter in southwest Santa Rosa.

"There was something very likeable about him," Baker said. "He was clean-shaven most of the time I saw him. You wouldn't really know he was homeless."

Fitzgerald knew plenty of hardships, but never displayed the bravado common among street people as a survival tactic, Baker said.

"He was such a gentle soul," Baker said. "I can't see him trying to hurt anyone else or himself."

Fitzgerald's life had few high points. He was a brilliant youth in the early 1960s, whose parochial school teachers wanted him to skip several grades and enter a university-bound program, Fitzgerald-Orr said. Fitzgerald suffered a psychotic break in his early teens and never recovered his mental health, she said.

His father supported him at first, and his sisters took over that responsibility after the four siblings came separately to the North Coast in the 1970s.

But Fitzgerald, who became drug-dependant, turned for the worse about 25 years ago and began living mostly on the streets, going in and out of rehab programs, group homes and shelters.

"He went from being brilliant to struggling to stay alive," Fitzgerald-Orr said. Her brother's bad choices "have broken our hearts for years," she said.

A Sonoma County homeless survey conducted in January found that one-fourth of respondents were suffering from mental illness.

Fitzgerald-Orr has no idea what was on her brother's mind as he ventured onto the freeway near the downtown exit about 8 p.m. on Saturday night.

His Catholic faith would keep him from suicide, if he was thinking rationally, she said. But Fitzgerald had been taking methadone, a drug used to treat heroin addiction, and may have mixed it with alcohol that night and wandered unknowingly onto the highway, she said.

"He didn't do it purposely," she said.

Fitzgerald walked onto the west side of the freeway and was struck by a Toyota Tacoma pickup six feet from the shoulder, the Highway Patrol said.

Another homeless, mentally ill man died at about the same spot last year, walking onto the freeway from the east side in the daytime, Officer Jon Sloat said.

The location, near the exit ramp that leads to Davis Street, is second to the Highway 12 and Dutton Avenue interchange as a crossing point for homeless people, who camp in the roadside landscaping, Sloat said.

In both locations, there are pedestrian routes that pass underneath the highways. "There's no reason to be up there (on the highway), but they are," Sloat said.

A relative saw Fitzgerald a few days before he died and said he "seemed to be his normal self," Fitzgerald-Orr said.

She wishes now she had tried to intervene in Fitzgerald's life one more time, but doesn't know if it would have made a difference.

To commemorate Fitzgerald's life and to continue his support of the two Senagalese children, his family has established a savings account at Redwood Credit Union, number 383078 and donations are welcome.

"You know what, his life was meaningful," Fitzgerald-Orr said. In his passing, she has one consolation.

"I know he's in a good place," Fitzgerald-Orr said. "He's out of the pain he was in most of his adult life."

You can reach Staff Writer

Guy Kovner at 521-5457 or [guy.kovner@pressdemocrat.com](mailto:guy.kovner@pressdemocrat.com).