I saw the red and blue light bar on top of the police SUV as I approached an embankment Saturday. I was on my way to Matt’s tent, which is adjacent to rusted railroad tracks that run parallel to a busy boulevard. It’s not unusual to see police and their vehicles around homeless encampments, so I kept walking with two bags of ready-to-eat meals and some water bottles; recently, Matt’s girlfriend had moved in with him.

Matt looked to be in his mid-to-late 30s. He kept himself fairly clean – clothes without many stains, his body pretty free of significant dirt and grime. While his tent site was littered with large, plastic irrigation pipes, a few bicycles, coolers and usually several bottles of vodka, it was free of large piles of trash that surrounds most homeless campsites.

I have been taking Matt food six days a week for about three weeks. Sometimes he wouldn’t be at the tent and I would leave the hot meals or food sack next to the tent’s opening. When he was there he was gracious and sincerely thankful. He remembered my name from the moment I first said: ‘Hi, I’m Steve from Open Heart Kitchen. Are you hungry?”

As I neared the police car and the two officers it was about 11:30 am. They stopped me and said I couldn’t go any further. Matt was discovered dead about 8:30 am.

I’d last seen Matt on Friday about 3:30 pm. I yelled out that I was approaching the tent, but didn’t hear an answer. As I got close I could see through the open tent flap that Matt was asleep or passed
out. His Chuck Taylor-clad feet were closest to the front of the tent and his long frame stretched toward the back.

Oh, my God, I thought: Was he dead on Friday and I didn’t know it, or check? No, the police said he was seen alive after I was there. The last time I talked to Matt was on Thursday. He and I chatted as he followed me to the car for an additional meal to give a homeless buddy who lives nearby. His eyes were bloodshot, hair disheveled and he was sweating. He always had the sweats. But his disposition was bright. He said again how much the meals meant to him and his girlfriend. He said “thank you” at least three times.

Matt was one of many homeless people who live on the sometimes razor-thin line between life and death because of the diseases of alcoholism and drug abuse. Police did not suspect foul play. He likely “OD’d.”

As I headed back down the embankment on the way to my car, food bags and water still in hand, my eyes welled up as I remembered my chats with Matt, his smile, his graciousness. And I thought how sad it was that he was gone, that the line had been crossed. I also felt sadness for his girlfriend, his family and his homeless friends.

When I jogged back across the four-lane boulevard that is traveled by thousands of people in normal times, I thought about how invisible he was to them even though he walked along the street regularly. The kids who used to ride their bikes at the BMX park across the road from where Matt lived would not have known him, either.

There are many *Matt’s* in the world who are on society’s bottom rung. People who get by in life minute-by-minute and are chained to booze and drugs. We fellow human beings haven’t figured out a holistic solution for lots of reasons. Many of us feel guilty about that. But I bet Matt would tell us, “Thank you for doing what you could.”

*This article, by Stephen E. Wright, a former San Jose Mercury News reporter, editor and editorial page editor, appeared in that newspaper on April 26. Stephen now works for Open Heart Kitchen and its Street Outreach program ([Openheartkitchen.org](http://Openheartkitchen.org)). Stephen also serves on the Sierra Pacific Synod Candidacy Committee, and is the spouse of Pr. Lori Eickmann, Interim Pastor at St. John’s, Antioch.*

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