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'Gentle, sweet loving person' - Life of Sharon Anderton remembered at memorial

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For more than 15 years, the family of Sharon Anderton searched for their wayward daughter, sister and mother.

They worried about where she had gone after leaving Massachusetts, and they wondered if she were all right.

It was only in her death that they would get the answers.

Anderton had been living in Loveland among the city's homeless population for more than a decade. She died May 8, found under a semitrailer in downtown.

Yet through her death, Anderton's family also learned that the 55-year-old's life in Colorado was far from a lonely one, or one without friendship, joy and meaning.

Monday night, the Loveland community helped prove it when more than 100 people attended a memorial service for Anderton at Christ's Church of the Rockies.

From nonprofit leaders who worked with her to homeless friends who lived with her, people from all walks of life paid tribute to the woman they'll remember as feisty, funny, intelligent and kind.

"She was a very gentle, sweet, loving person," said Joanne Guinn, who met Anderton through friends.

"The way she lived her life with kindness and goodness should always be remembered."

While Anderton may not have had a traditional home during her time in Loveland, those who knew her emphasized it never stopped her from being an active member of the community and proud of the town she called home.

From serving on the city's Homeless Task Force to helping run the inclement weather shelters, Anderton was always ready to lend a helping hand.

Pastor Tom Albrecht - who runs Christ's Church of the Rockies and the meal service for the homeless out of it - reflected on Anderton's constant initiatives in caring for the church's facility and those who use it.

One day, after noticing guests were leaving their cigarette butts on the sidewalk out front, Anderton showed up with a fleet of coffee cans that could be used as ashtrays, he remembered.

"She always showed a willingness to serve," Albrecht said.

Many others echoed memories of Anderton's hospitality, especially for the homeless population, when the microphone was opened for guests to share their stories of her during the service.

"Some people called her Mama Sharon," one woman said. "She would always make sure they were taken care of."

Others who knew Anderton, from librarians to bus drivers, took the microphone to reflect on the person they grew to love.

Anderton's great humor, passion for the Red Sox, and her abundant hugs and kisses on the cheek were among the favorite traits remembered.

Many also noted how much Anderton had shown them about life.

"Not only has she taught me the face of homelessness," said a man who volunteered at the shelters, "but she taught me the heart of it as well."

While Anderton's Loveland friends were abundant at her service, her family members from her life before were not able to attend - although "I would have given anything to be there," said her sister, Mary Ellen Carmack, who lives in Illinois.

Carmack had been searching for Anderton ever since she left her family all those years ago. Despite every effort to locate her, including seeking help through police departments, the family never could find Anderton, she said.

To this day, they don't understand what drove her to leave.

"She had every opportunity, she really did," Carmack said in a phone interview. "All the love a family could give."

But still, for reasons only Anderton could know, she left her husband and three sons, never to return, Carmack added.

"We never stopped looking for her and never stopped praying for her to contact us," Carmack wrote in a letter that was read during the service.

It was only after her death, and through the persistence of Larimer County coroner Maury Miller in finding the family, that they received the answer they'd been dreading all along.

"I've been waiting 10 years to get the call," Carmack wrote of hearing the news of Anderton's death.

"At least now we know where she is and that she's finally at peace and is safe and loved once again."

Soon, Anderton's ashes will be flown back to Massachusetts, where she will be reunited with her family one last time.

Yet the friends she made in Loveland will not forget the woman who gave them so much.

"She was a very special lady," said Kevin Boyle, who knew Anderton through the emergency shelters. "She will be very missed by the community."

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