

TIMOTHY DES VOIGNES
Waiter

Timothy Des Voignes, a quiet 25-year-old who seemed to be getting his life together, became the second resident at The Star Hotel on Mission Street in 10 months to take his own life, by leaping from a Tenderloin garage roof six days before Christmas.

Mr. des Voignes moved into The Star near 18th Street in September, aided by a program of the city's South of Market Mental Health Service that supports the homeless. Diagnosed as paranoid-schizophrenic, he began receiving SSI.

Dark-haired, slightly built, Mr. Des Voignes had apparently been happily working as a waiter two days a week and anticipated being hired part time at a restaurant he liked better, said his case manager, Ross Nelson of Baker Places. He bought a skateboard and it became his recreational passion.

On Dec. 19, Mr. Des Voignes went to the Downtown Center Garage, across the street from the Hilton Hotel at Mason and O'Farrell streets. He took the elevator up eight stories to the roof, went to the building's edge overlooking Mason. It was 2:30 p.m. He set down his skateboard and backpack and jumped.

Salim Perez saw it. He works at GoCar Rental at the garage in a small, glass-enclosed office by the sidewalk. He can see up and down Mason, and he saw the young man plummet and, clearing the eight-foot sidewalk, land in the street 50 yards away. A small crowd gathered as Perez ran to the spot.



"To be out that far, he didn't fall," Perez said. "He leaped. The security guard found his things on the roof. I was really affected. I closed up the shop and went home."

On Jan. 4, The Star held a memorial service with 15 residents, hotel employees, mental health workers and Mr. Des Voignes' case worker present.

"He was a nice young kid," said desk clerk Patricia Abrams. "Reticent and shy, no problems, and one of our best tenants. He didn't really hang out with people."

In April, Abrams had shared similar sentiments in a memorial for artist Masahiro Okada who had been at The Star nine months and a client of the city's Mission Mental Health program when he hanged himself in his room. It shook up the hotel residents. The Department of Public Health held grievance sessions for them.

Mr. Okada was 40 and a loner who, known to no one, had filled his room with pictures of delicate flowers he had painted. But he couldn't patch things up with his parents about being gay.

The hotel asked the Rev. Glenda Hope to con-

duct his memorial. Afterward, she and three others went upstairs and with their hands on the door of 318, Mr. Okada's room, blessed it, a practice she said that can make it right for those who might feel a suicide room is "haunted" or "bad luck." Mr. des Voignes' room was 311.

Mr. Des Voignes was born in Hayward but raised in Amador County where he was a Boy Scout, then a member of the Amador High School wrestling team and the school band. After graduating, he did a stint in the Navy, got an AA degree from College of Dupage in Illinois and attended the University of Illinois. Then he headed back West.

"I never saw him depressed," said his case worker Nelson. "Quiet, yes, but no sign he was suicidal. He wanted to be a waiter. And he always responded to our outreach. He was near my age (22) and I liked working with him. Things were on the up and up."

The Rev. Hope conducted his memorial, too.

"We can never know what's in someone's mind unless we put it out there," she said. "Maybe his final gift is a message for us to be open to each other, to take the risk. Some will take the time to listen. There are people in this room who will listen when things are too heavy to carry. This is a very young man and it is very sad."

Mr. Des Voignes' mother, Michel Des Voignes, came from Pine Grove to remove his personal effects on Dec. 29.

—TOM CARTER

**MARK SIMON
ANDY FARLEY
GEORGE ALLEN VOLANTE SR.**
Tenderloin Health memorial for 3

"Our years are soon gone. . ." spoke Father John Hardin, executive director of St. Anthony Foundation, at a Dec. 13 memorial for Andy Farley, Mark Simon and George Volante, three Tenderloin Health clients who died in November and December.

The memorial, held at Tenderloin Health's offices at 183 Golden Gate, drew 30 people, and was officiated by Hardin and the Rev. Glenda Hope, director of S.F. Network Ministries. Song was provided by Laura Fannon, a member of Threshold Choirs, a Bay Area group founded 10 years ago to comfort dying and grieving people.

Mr. Farley was well-known to many at the memorial, who recalled him as cheerful and honest about the AIDS he had lived with for many years. His home was the Ambassador Hotel, where an estimated 80% of residents have AIDS or are HIV-positive, Hope said. She conducts a drop-in chaplaincy at the hotel and had known Mr. Farley for 20 years. She admired that he always "was who he was."

Hardin also had stayed in touch with Mr. Farley all those years, he said. "Andy struggled, but he was always up and cheerful. I remember a last conversation — he told me that his time was short. He fought the good fight."

Winter holidays no trigger for suicides

Stats show spring the peak months, but no studies as to why

BY TOM CARTER

It's a media-driven myth that more suicides occur during the winter holidays than at any other time of year, facts mirrored by the number of calls for help to San Francisco Suicide Prevention's crisis line as well as a nationwide study.

"The most (suicides) are in April," Suicide Prevention Executive Director Eve Meyer said in an interview. "And even though we get fewer calls starting in November, and trailing off in December, these calls are very worrisome."

"The rest of the year, people are often calling back to say that they are okay. But we have very few of those in December. That's when people who call are in tremendous pain."

There's no scientific explanation for the pattern, Meyer said, because no one has investigated it.

The fewest suicides occur in November, December and January, according to a study released in December 2000 by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. The most suicides occur in April, May and June with the peak at the end of April 1996, the latest year that monthly figures were gleaned from the National Center for Health Statistics.

In her experience, the pattern has held true for 20 years, Meyer said.

But that apparently varies in San Francisco. Statistics from 2001-04, the most recent available from the medical examiner's Web site, show that

April along with December averaged less than eight suicides. In separate years, March, August and twice September led in suicides; the average was 13. San Francisco's annual suicide average was 106.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded the Annenberg national report to explore the way the media characterized suicide during the winter holidays.

In 67 stories reporting suicides between Nov. 8, 1999, and Jan. 15, 2000, more than half (55%) attributed suicides to the "holiday blues." When there are "no suicides on a holiday," the report said, "news accounts tend to express surprise."

Moreover, "only 25% of the stories identified depression or other chronic mental-health conditions as the most common underlying cause of suicide," even though most people who commit suicide have been diagnosed as mentally ill, it said.

There's no scientific explanation why spring is the peak time for suicide, Meyer said, but funding a study to find out why isn't likely.

"Suicide still has old religious attitudes attached to it involving sin and guilt," she said. "It's shamed-based and people don't talk about it. The government figures they'd kill themselves anyway. So it doesn't study suicide like it does the causes of other diseases, like cancer. But there was a time when no one talked about cancer, either."

Founded in 1963, the agency's 150 trained volunteers provide suicide prevention and more generalized counseling 24 hours a day. The crisis line is: 781-0500, and, toll-free, 1-800-273-TALK. ■

Two of Mr. Farley's friends elaborated on his optimism.

"He was a really good man and he's won the race that we're still running," said one. "He wouldn't want us to be unhappy."

"Andy was always kind," said another. "I never heard a cross word from him — there aren't many people you can say that about."

Hank Wilson, a Tenderloin Health community center support worker, called him "demanding but patient, sensitive and never a whiner. And he was out in the community — where he wanted to be — until the end."

Mr. Farley died Nov. 22. He was 47.

Perri Franskoviak, Tenderloin Health's behavioral health services manager, said there was much to admire in the three men being honored at the memorial. "I remember Andy brought me his autobiography to read one day. He was so genuine, and that was probably true of Mark and George, too. I honor that."

Mr. Simon, who died in early December, was 46.

"Mark was pleasant, even on his worse days — he could always conjure up a smile from you," said Angela Griffin, his former case manager. "He also was very bright and really interested in maintaining his independence. Everyone liked him."

Mr. Volante died Nov. 9 at age 41. Five of his relatives attended the memorial, including one of his sisters, Pamela Cachay of San Mateo, and three of her seven children. Still overcome with grief, she said little publicly: "George was my best friend. I just hope he's happy."

Later, however, she privately shared stories of her brother's and her own hard life — one that ended for him when he hung himself in his room at the Sunset Hotel, 161 Sixth St. "People need to know," she said.

"We were so close. He was only 11 months older than me and we were raised pretty much together, in Minneapolis, in a dysfunctional family. After our mother abandoned us, we were sent to foster care in California."

It was 1981, and the two teenagers essentially raised themselves, she said. When they aged out of foster care, they hit the streets in San Francisco and soon were officially homeless.

"We hustled, though never together, but we watched out for each other always. He was in prison, in and out, and he was depressed and he was HIV-positive. He tried to jump off the bridge a few times."

But in the last two years, he'd stayed out of prison, she said. "I was so proud of him. He no longer seemed angry and scared. He had a girlfriend, and they wanted to get married after her divorce came through."

It wasn't enough. His girlfriend discovered his body.

Ms. Cachay was notified of the circumstances of her brother's death, but not where it had happened.

"I knew it was on Sixth Street so I went to one hotel and asked, 'Was there a hanging here yesterday?' They said, 'No, try next door.'"

After several tries, she found the Sunset. She later realized that some people she'd approached didn't connect the hanging with the name George Volante. "They only knew him by the name 'Regulator,'" she said.

"I don't think anyone realized things were so bad with him. But we should have known. There's a family history of depression. I think: There but for the grace of God go I. I've been clean and sober for years. I was rescued — he wasn't."

Mr. Volante is survived by a 17-year-old son, George Allen Volante Jr., who lives in Alameda, five sisters, his birth mother, and 14 nieces and nephews. He was buried in Minnesota.

—MARJORIE BEGGS

Green Door pot club approved

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nine months and was paying \$1,400 a month, he said. He got approvals from the proper city agencies and waited for a go-ahead conference with City Administrator Deborah Edgerly that never came.

"But she was not dealing with any of the dispensaries," Nolin said. "I couldn't take any more losses so I left and came here."

"What I like about San Francisco is that people do what they say they'll do. They follow the regulations and that I can understand."

"We have an excellent blueprint," he said. "And if the city wants more dispensaries we can provide them with the right way to do it. I've learned a lot and because I've done it myself, I've probably saved myself \$50,000 in lawyers' fees." ■