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## Remembering the City's Forgotten

**By Lloyd Jojola***Of the Journal*

Rarely, or really never, do my interviews with people end in a hug, but the one I had with Phyllis Romero did.

She said something to me along the lines of feeling good about getting it out, talking as we did in a small computer room at St. Martin's Hospitality Center that December day last year.

Romero gave me about half an hour of her time, telling me about her friend, Iva Rae Coriz, who had lived homeless and was shot and left to die at an Albuquerque industrial-area loading dock in 2009.

But Romero shed some light on herself, too. "I've been out on the streets for nearly 20 years off and on," she said.

It was a week before the annual march and memorial to remember all the homeless people who have died in the city during the year, as the year closes. It's a gathering Romero told me she had taken part in before.

"I went to several of the vigils ... where we carried candles and spoke to the people, right there in the church, about the individuals ... reading off some names, too," Romero said, referring to the list of the people being remembered.

I spoke briefly with Romero again after the nondenominational service and candlelight tribute last year and, now knowing who she was, spotted her after that — a few times along Mountain Road, on the strip between First and Fourth where pedestrian traffic often flows, and once sitting on a bench outside a grocery store at 12th Street and Candelaria.

She was short, stout and seemingly always wore a cap.

And five months after we smiled and parted ways, 60-year-old Romero was dead.

### Dying on the streets

Be it of accidents, natural causes, homicide, suicide or poor health conditions, at least 53 people without homes died in Albuquerque during 2010, as of mid-December. The number announced last year was 66. It was 48 the year before.

And as is done around this time each year, advocates for the homeless, community members and others mourned those lives lost and hoped to raise awareness about homelessness.

"Every night in Albuquerque, at least 3,200 men, women and children will be without homes, but we know how to end homelessness. The Memorial Vigil is a time to honor those who have passed away during the year, but it is also a call to action to our community to invest in the housing and services that people need to exit homelessness," Lisa Huval of the New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness, said in announcing the remembrance that is to take place today.

She passed along information from a study done by the National Health Care for the Homeless Council: People experiencing homelessness are three to four times more likely to die prematurely than those who have a place to live.

### **Life with no home**

During our conversation at St. Martin's, a homeless services provider just north of Downtown, Romero told me she was from one of the pueblos west of Albuquerque.

She alluded to domestic abuse as being a part of her past.

When Romero talked about her friend, Coriz, and how her friend would leave the city and then return, Romero explained that happened because her friend was "used to the streets."

"Like me. I came back from the rez," Romero said. "I couldn't hack it on the reservation because of the way (some family members) were acting, too. They were like trying to run my life. I'm so used to having my own life, too."

Romero was pronounced dead at 10:41 p.m. May 6, 2010.

A 75-year-old woman driving a silver Crown Victoria north on Alvarado at Central "said she had the green light. She reported she did not see the person (Romero) until the collision and could not stop in time," reads an Albuquerque police report detailing the crash.

What's clear is the scene that was left, the one described by police: "There was a white sheet covering the victim as she was lying under the front of the Ford, between the front wheels."

Romero died of blunt force neck injuries, the autopsy report concludes. A toxicology report showed she had alcohol in her system.

Besides the clothing covering her — including two pairs of socks, two sweatshirts, sweatpants and black sneakers — Romero's 5-foot-2-inch body was accompanied by a green bag filled with pieces of an existence. Inside was everything from an undergarment to a hat, gloves of two colors, soap, thread, a cell phone, makeup, a wristwatch, pencil sharpener, a yellow, metal necklace with blue and green stones, adhesive bandages, miscellaneous papers, barrettes, hair ties, earrings and a hairbrush.

It also held "jewelry-making components" and "multiple earrings on a black board."

A son of Romero's dropped by St. Martin's shortly after her death and thanked the staff for always caring for his mom.

He told one staff member about how he would come and take her to his house sometimes, and she would stay for a few days.

"He would get up one morning, and she would be gone," the St. Martin's worker told me, conveying what the son said. "He said he could never understand why she went back out on the streets. He knew she had friends out there, but he worried about her.

"He said that now he doesn't have to worry any more, because now he knows where she is."

*UpFront is a daily front-page opinion column. Lloyd Jojola can be reached at 823-3561 or [jjojola@abqjournal.com](mailto:jjojola@abqjournal.com).*

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