

## Sparky's life without rules: street was home, hurt. Street was death

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Sparky Taylor, weeks shy of his 50th birthday, died just before Canada Day, after a seizure and suspected cardiac arrest. The booze, the decades without shelter, the constant injuries, took their final toll.

**BRIGITTE BOUVIER / Ottawa Citizen**

An outreach worker said this about Sparky Taylor, a downtown fixture who stubbornly couldn't escape the jungle of street life.

"I was always amazed at his capacity for misery."

Taylor, weeks shy of his 50th birthday, died just before Canada Day, after a seizure and suspected cardiac arrest. The booze, the decades without shelter, the constant injuries, took their final toll. Death stills even the most restless of drunks.

"It ripped through the Ottawa Police Service when he died," said Sgt. John Gibbons, once a front-line worker at the Ottawa Mission shelter. "It was like the end of an era."

I met him once or twice. So did most of Centretown. Taylor once told me he'd been arrested 60 times, mostly for petty things. Gibbons calls that figure "conservative."

It is astounding the conflict and chaos he lived through.

He was once up on a murder charge, later dropped, after a man was set on fire near Bank and Somerset streets in 1996, the culmination of a drinking binge in back lot gone wrong.

Tagging along with two outreach volunteers, we ran into him one November morning in 2011 along a grassy patch across from the National Arts Centre. It was 11 a.m. and he was rip-roaring drunk. They told me then he hadn't slept inside in 15 years. He was laughing away, big smile framed with that moustache. We couldn't find the humour.

Judy Taylor, 54, one of the city's longest-serving street nurses, has kept in a file a Citizen photo of Sparky with a sad-eyed woman named Lynn Maureen Bluecloud. Together, they were living for a spell under a bridge at Rideau and Sussex.

“She froze to death.”

So she did. In a story that was raised on Parliament Hill, Bluecloud died of exposure in February 1999. A native from Saskatchewan, she was five months pregnant, only 33, dead in the shadow of the Peace Tower.

How many more did Sparky see fade away like this? He took much to his grave.

Taylor's career overlaps with Sparky's time on the street. One of the first times she encountered him was to treat a bug-infested wound in his leg.

She and other nurses, in fact, can scarcely remember seeing Sparky without some kind of bandage or injury.

When very drunk, he could be a loud, abusive, terrifying figure, behaviour that caused him to be frequently barred from shelters.

“He was a kind, gentle fellow in a lot of ways,” says nurse Taylor. He was particularly so with women.

She knew him better than most, seeing him almost weekly for about 25 years, and was a constant advocate. She helped get him his birth certificate, then health card — things homeless people tend to lose — and did countless favours.

She knows he was born Aug. 15, 1964, on the Curve Lake native reserve near Peterborough. He was adopted by a white family and given the name Mark, which he disliked. For a time, he was a cook in Toronto but showed up in Ottawa at least 20 years ago. He has two grown daughters.

Over time, he became a well-known panhandler on Bank and Elgin streets.

“Sparky certainly didn't live by any rules and he didn't like to be told there were rules, but I really liked him,” said Marg Smeaton, manager of health services at the Ottawa Mission.

“There was never a time when you didn't see Sparky laughing. He had a great sense of humour. He managed to con all of us for meals when he wasn't supposed to get them.”

She too is struck by the sheer volume of trauma that street people, especially the hard-core ones, have to deal with.

“You know, I live out in Kanata and if I didn’t work there, and see the day-to-day stuff, I wouldn’t believe these things happen in Ottawa.”

Sgt. Gibbons, in fact, has a harrowing story of the time he was trying to help Sparky and a girlfriend after she passed out, injured, inside an ATM alcove in a downtown bank. The woman had one end of rope around her neck and the other end around a big, snarling dog.

As Sparky tried to control the excited pit-bull mix, it lunged at the police officer, forcing him to shoot it. The bullet only grazed the dog and, after surgery, it survived. This was November, 2002. It made the papers.

“I guess (the police) had a bit of a love-hate relationship with him,” said Gibbons. “(But) I don’t think he’s ever committed a crime sober.”

Sparky was an old-style street drunk who surprised outreach workers with the sheer longevity of his time without many possessions, an address or anything approximating the comforts of home.

There is, in fact, a dedicated crew of workers — public and private — reaching out to the city’s dispossessed. Usually, they succeed, however you measure victory. Sparky, however, had his own way, the hard way.

Wendy Muckle is executive director of Ottawa Inner City Health. She’s had frequent dealings with Sparky over the past 15 years.

“Most people come and go on the streets, but not Sparky, and I never really understood why.”

She’s a little tormented by the fact they could never bring Sparky in from the cold, so to speak.

“I think we did everything that Sparky let us do,” she said. “Ultimately, my take on things was that he didn’t believe that he deserved to have a (good) life.”

Maybe it was so. Maybe he didn’t think he was worth it. Who would, really, living in that world of hurt, where friends too often die, and guilt or shame or misery, are there every dawn?