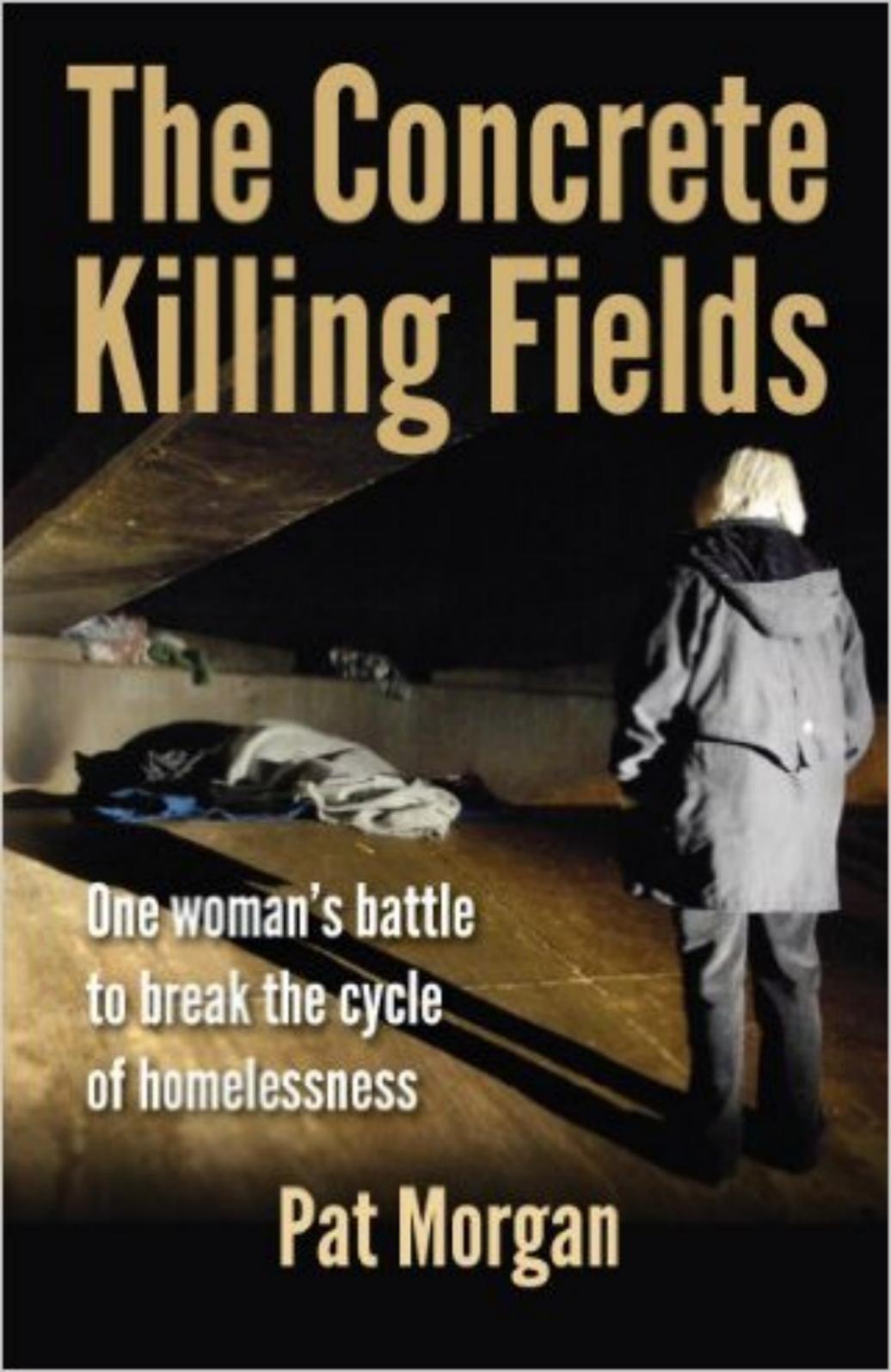


The Concrete Killing Fields

A photograph of a person with blonde hair, wearing a grey hooded jacket and dark pants, standing in a dark, industrial-looking space. The person is seen from behind, looking towards a body lying on the floor. The body is covered with a white sheet and a blue blanket. The scene is dimly lit, with long shadows cast across the floor.

One woman's battle
to break the cycle
of homelessness

Pat Morgan

CHAPTER 1

The Hearse

*During those years we'd listened to
thousands of homeless people tell us
heart-breaking, often maddening stories,
about why they were homeless.*

It was early morning when the “hearse” rumbled into the downtown alley and picked up John Marshall where he lay in a dumpster in a pile of debris from the city’s streets. It was late afternoon when it dumped him out at the city dump. If a sharp-eyed landfill operator hadn’t spotted what was left of a human being tumbling out with the trash, and managed to utter, in an icy whisper, “There’s a person under there,” the city dump would almost certainly have been John’s final resting place—and his only “hearse” would have been a city sanitation truck. It may well have been his execution chamber too, but I choose to believe that he was already dead when the truck

lifted the dumpster just high enough to let the refuse from the city streets slide down the steel gullet and into the belly of the beast.

Truth be told, I have no basis for believing that John was already dead. I just don't want to believe he was alive when the truck's compactor began to grind and smash and roar and belch to make room for its next meal. Whenever I think about him, most of the time I tell myself he probably froze to death. It was really cold, and I've heard that freezing is a relatively painless way to die—but then the people who told me that hadn't frozen to death, either. If John didn't freeze to death, I prefer to think that maybe he had a heart attack or just passed out in the trash of his tomb and didn't wake up and never knew what ate him. I could have checked with the morgue to see what the autopsy report said about the cause of his death, but I didn't. I really didn't want to know.

The local media apparently found the circumstances of John's tragic demise newsworthy. One of the television reporters even hustled his crew out to broadcast live from the city dump, and the newspaper reported John's death on the front page of the Metro section. The city and county mayors were properly appalled that such a tragedy could happen in their beautiful city, particularly since the alley where John had found refuge in the dumpster was within easy walking distance of city hall, the county office building, the federal building, a half-dozen churches, a couple of emergency shelters, and two drop-in centers for homeless people. John was in plain sight, yet invisible.

Providers of services were distraught, especially those of us who weren't professional social workers, and therefore, either

didn't know how to stop—or didn't want to stop—getting enmeshed in the lives of the homeless people we were trying to help. No matter how much we tried to help and no matter how hard we worked, another homeless person had fallen through the full-of-holes safety net of services and shelters and died on the streets.

Brother Jim, a young man whose only credentials for operating an emergency shelter were a good heart and a willingness to try to help, described in tearful detail his many efforts to “save” John ... until somebody pointed out that maybe the reason he couldn't save John was because he didn't know him well enough to even know what color he was—not that it would have made any difference. To Brother Jim's credit, in a city where the racial divide still hadn't narrowed nearly enough to make race irrelevant, he at least, was truly color-blind.

And Brother Jim wasn't the only person who didn't know much, if anything, about John. None of the street people that I talked to knew him, and none of the service providers I asked, and I knew almost all of them, could remember him. I didn't know him either, even though I'd personally worked with hundreds of homeless people during the five years I'd recently spent, first as one of the volunteers and then as the unpaid director/developer of the Street Ministry, a drop-in center in the basement of Calvary Episcopal Church in the heart of downtown Memphis.

The Street Ministry ... Its Services ... and Its Congregation

During those years we'd listened to thousands of homeless people tell us heart-breaking, often maddening, stories about

why they were homeless. We'd then done what we could, with and without success, given our limited resources, to help them break the stranglehold of the streets that far too often led to hospitals, jails, prison or the morgue.

Over that time, I was devastated by the rising body count from the concrete killing fields, and frustrated beyond belief with the woefully inadequate, dysfunctional system of social services and treatment resources to help the homeless people who'd come to mean so much to me. I was not giving up, but I'd resigned as director to go back to college full-time to earn a degree. Surely a degree would give me a more credible voice in helping to develop and implement more effective policies and programs—and an effective system—for helping homeless people. I had no idea where going back to college would eventually take me, but wherever it was, I was ready to go.

A few days after John died—now with a full name, John Marshall—he was laid to rest without fanfare but with infinite care by Brother Charles, a caring, committed man of the cloth who operated the other downtown drop-in center ... and the city went back to normal. Politicians went back to regular politicking ... Reporters went back to chasing more traditional ambulances ... And homeless people all over America went right on crawling into dumpsters to collect cans or scrounge for food, or to sleep or stay warm—or die. And I went back to my tiny apartment and began to write about the homeless people who had transformed my life.

However, the more I wrote, the more I realized that their stories and my stories had morphed into our story. They would no longer be invisible.