

## Sharon Ostman: Killed in San Luis Obispo in 2005

April 07, 2010 12:28 PM



Sharon Ostman was found beaten, strangled and sexually assaulted early July 11, 2005, in San Luis Obispo Creek near Mission Plaza.

Nearly three years after the slaying, Freddie Joe Lewis was arrested for her murder. He was sentenced to serve life in prison after pleading no contest -- which results in a conviction without admitting guilt -- to second-degree murder. He is not eligible for parole until he has served 15 years.

Lewis had originally pleaded not guilty to first-degree murder, sexual penetration by a foreign object and being a habitual sex offender, according to court records.

Right before his trial was scheduled to begin, he changed his plea.

Ostman was a 59-year-old homeless woman who friends said was known for her kindness and generosity.

"I didn't meet anyone she didn't feed or buy coffee for out of her own pocket," Denise Mondragon said shortly after Ostman's murder. "Everyone's had a moment with her."

Peter Schustack said he first met Ostman when she offered to walk him home. Schustack is visually impaired.

"Boy I tell you," he added, "I will miss her very much."

San Luis Obispo resident Jennifer Pitts said she organized a vigil after Ostman was found dead as a way to remember a woman she felt compelled to reach out to but never knew well.

"I just felt it was necessary for her and for her community," Pitts said before the vigil began. Ostman's death "was horrific and tragic, and I didn't want that to be the last memory of her."

Pitts said she saw Ostman every day at the post office on Marsh Street and would often stop and say hello.

Ostman's body was found largely unclothed in the creek by a local man who was walking through the Mission Plaza.

Police never reported a motive in the case. But evidence found at the scene included an eyeglass lens that matched Lewis' and his DNA underneath Ostman's fingernails, which had been submerged in the creek for hours, according to Deputy District Attorney Lee Cunningham.

Lewis had also told investigators three different versions of his whereabouts or interactions with Ostman the day of the murder.

<https://www.sanluisobispo.com/news/local/crime/article39122292.html>

# Dead End

NT [newtimeslo.com/sanluisobispo/dead-end/Content](http://newtimeslo.com/sanluisobispo/dead-end/Content)

By Karen Velie

She was spiritual, intelligent, and incredibly generous. She had a degree in literature and was known for always having a good book on hand. She was a woman without vices who was strongly opposed to drinking and drugs.

She was an unusually beautiful woman with flawless skin, striking blue eyes, and an almost palpable confidence, which allowed her to achieve goals that women in the past had been denied.

She was a loyal wife who helped her husband succeed in his career and a loving mother who devoted herself to raising their four children and volunteering in the community. It was the life Sharon Ostman had always dreamed of. But it would never fully be realized.

#For the last 20 years of her life Sharon Ostman would wander the streets of San Luis Obispo, weathered, disheveled, and confused, trying to negotiate the lonely and homeless world of forgotten alcoholics, dangerous drug addicts, and sexual misfits. It is testimony to her spirit that she survived that long.

Dawn was just breaking on July 11, 2005, when Sharon's half-naked body was discovered partially submerged in San Luis Obispo Creek. There were marks that showed blunt force trauma to her head, bruises over much of her body, her teeth smashed, her tongue split, and her mouth filled with blood. She had been physically battered, sexually assaulted, and brutally murdered. Sharon Ostman was 59. Whoever killed her has yet to be caught.



## Sharon's last day

The account of Sharon's murder this past summer rippled through the street community like a deadly disease.

Especially hard hit was her longtime friend Eddie Simmer, a local resident who befriends and assists the homeless.

"We got real close over the last 10 years," Eddie said, as his eyes became misty. "Every morning I would wake her up and we would go for coffee."

Just after daybreak on July 10, Eddie and Sharon went to the Downtown Centre Starbucks to enjoy their morning coffee. As they left, Sharon handed an envelope to Denver Hoffman, a friend who only months before had also been homeless.

"She had placed a five-dollar bill behind the Starbucks gift certificate in the envelope." Denver said. "She was always trying to pay for my coffee."

Sharon then walked up to Scolari's, where she purchased a large box of doughnuts, apple fritters, and bear claws, and then walked down to the post office, where she ran into Doctor John, a local street musician.

"She gave me a big box of doughnuts," said John. "It was the first thing she ever gave me."

John said it wasn't long after that when he saw Sharon get into a violent argument with a homeless man over religion. Sharon was known to be passionate about her religious beliefs.

For most of that day, Sharon was seen sitting on the green metal bench in front Jamba Juice holding one of many small cardboard signs she carried that described her situation.

Later that night at about 9 p.m., Sharon asked Eddie to join her while she treated a couple of young transient men to dinner at Woodstocks Pizza.

Sharon never had much money, but she had received a large disability check not long before she died. Friends claim that she was in possession of between \$1,000 and \$2,500 the night she was savagely murdered.

However, police say they found very little money on Sharon's body the morning of July 11, the day she was found.

"After dinner she wanted to hold hands and pray that the two boys would be kept warm," Eddie said. "I'm not spiritual, but I would pray with her because she wanted me to."

At 11 p.m., Sharon and Eddie agreed to meet for coffee in the morning and said their goodbyes. It was the last time Eddie would see Sharon alive.

## **Growing up**

Sharon Ostman was born Aug. 23, 1945, in the state of Washington near the southern tip of Puget Sound. A mishap with forceps during her birth produced a substantial scar on her cheek. According to her aunt, Sharon endured 30 to 40 radiation treatments during the first few years of her life in attempts to reduce the scarring.

When Sharon was 5, she, along with her mother, father, and two sisters, moved to Paradise, Calif., in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains.

"She was a cute and feisty child; an extrovert with a beautiful singing voice," her sister Vivian said. "When she was 5 a teacher asked our parents to let her make a record, and they did."

During this time, her father, Ike, worked as a journeyman pipe fitter, a job that required his family to move repeatedly throughout Northern California. Her mother Annie worked intermittently as a grocery-store meat packer. Sharon attended eight different elementary schools.

In 1955 Ike and Annie divorced. Annie took custody of Sharon and her two sisters. She soon remarried and had four more children, three sons and another daughter, during Sharon's early teenage years.

Vivian said Sharon planned to work as an architect someday, but at Shasta High School in Redding girls were forbidden to take mechanical drawing. Sharon would not be deterred nor denied; she petitioned the school board to allow her to take the class and became the school's first female mechanical drawing student.

After she graduated from high school in 1964, she entered Allan Hancock College in Santa Maria, where she studied architecture, took private classical singing lessons, and majored in literature, in which she eventually received her degree.

In 1970 Sharon married a man whom she met while staying with her father in Chico. His name is Robert, though he preferred not to use his last name for this article.

## **Problems**

#Sharon and Robert were married for 14 years and lived on the Central Coast. During this time, she and Robert had four children, two girls and two boys. She devoted herself to her family. Robert became a teacher at a nearby junior college and Sharon often typed his class lectures.

Robert said, "For 14 years we had a great marriage. She was a wonderful, giving woman; she helped me get my master's and assisted me in my career."

Along the way, though, troubles were brewing. In 1973, Sharon's mother Annie collapsed at work and was rushed to the hospital. Annie died of lung cancer a short time later. In 1975, her brother Bruce was killed in a motorcycle accident when he was 19. Both of these major losses in her life hit Sharon extremely hard, Vivian said, which may have contributed to the collapse of her marriage.

"Then, boom, it was like an explosion," Robert said.

"One day everything was different. I was afraid to leave her home alone with the kids. One time I found her swinging one of our children by their hair."

Around 1984, Robert filed for divorce and the battle over the children began.

"The custody fight cost me everything I had," Robert said. "Sharon couldn't take care of the kids. If I had to do it again, I would just grab them and run."

Sharon lost custody of her children and a house she had purchased shortly after her divorce. She left the Central Coast and went north to work as a laborer and began drifting from job to job. She camped in hotel rooms, slept in her truck, or stayed at her sister's home in Northern California on weekends.

It was during these visits with her brothers and sister when they began to realize that something was seriously wrong.

"Sharon would at times become psychotic and paranoid," said her brother Ted Blankenheim, who lives in Shasta. "She was delusional, but never violent."

Sharon would become agitated and cut short her visits with family when they would plead with her to seek help. She found therapy and counseling oppressive and was deeply opposed to taking medications for any reason.



When Vivian began to pressure her to have treatment, Sharon stuck her thumb out, caught a ride from a truck driver, and left California in 1985, beginning a pattern that she would follow for the rest of her life.

She camped in Florida for a few months and then hitched a ride to Boston. She slept in the residence hall of a church where she had been volunteering. For six months her family had no idea where she was, and for five years they had little contact as she continued to drift throughout the country, her family said.

In 1990 Sharon returned to California, and with the assistance of a social worker agreed to sign up for disability, as long as it was under the guise of post-traumatic stress disorder or work-related injuries and not mental illness.

Though there is a strong history of schizophrenia in the family, Sharon refused the diagnoses, Ted said. "Her life was filled with wonderful moments, but it was a nightmare, also."

### **The streets of SLO**

In 1995, Sharon settled on the streets of San Luis Obispo. For about eight years she regularly camped out by a small creek, below a tall palm tree next to French Hospital. She claimed that the land belonged to her.

She roped off a kitchen and regularly weeded what she considered to be her homestead. Eventually the security guards at French Hospital grew impatient with her claim, and Sharon was removed from the property and arrested for trespassing, her friends said.

Continuously looking for places to camp, Sharon attempted more than once to sleep on the memorial bench that sits behind the Marsh Street parking structure.

"The police wouldn't let her sleep there," Eddie said. "They kept running her off. Sharon knew it was dangerous down at the Mission, but she couldn't sleep anywhere else."

Friends say Sharon feared hanging out or sleeping in Mission Plaza - too many strung-out meth addicts and dopers.

Her family and friends often expressed frustration at not being able to reach her with the help she desperately needed.

"I would try to get her to stay with me, but she wanted to be by herself," Eddie said. "Sharon liked the streets; it was her home. When it rained, I would go find her and only then would she agree to stay at my place."

When Sharon became ill or frightened, which was often, she would travel north to see her brothers and sister and restock her wardrobe with outfits they had purchased for her. At the same time, Sharon resisted any efforts her family made to provide a roof over her head.

"She was afraid of being trapped somewhere," Vivian said. "Our attempts to get her into housing would always end up with Sharon becoming upset and leaving."

The family attempted to have Sharon committed numerous times into a facility where she would be safe and warm and receive the medical help she desperately needed. But unless people are classified as a danger to themselves or others, the law states, they must agree to hospitalization, and Sharon would not, her family said.

"We wanted desperately to get her off the streets, but we couldn't," Ted said. "Where is the cure for this?"

When the weather in SLO would become particularly nasty, Sharon would either rent a hotel room or seek shelter in the home of a charitable city resident or a friend.

"She would come here when she didn't feel good about being outside," said Nancy Griffin, who would often provide Sharon with a place to sleep, shower, and wash her clothes. "She would call this a safe place."

Another safe place was the downtown Christian Science Reading Room, which Sharon visited two or three days a week.

During her life on the streets in SLO, Sharon was arrested several times; mostly for trespassing and picking up wood to build a campfire. A few weeks before her murder the police picked Sharon up in an agitated state and took her for a short stay at Sierra Vista Regional Medical Center.

"She was sent to mental health facilities several times," Vivian said. Sharon's longest period of treatment occurred after she made a visit to then Governor Deukmejian's office and accused the state of stealing her property. A ruckus ensued and state police transported Sharon to a Sacramento mental health facility.

After two weeks, She was released, drugged and disoriented, onto the streets of Sacramento. Ted said it was fortunate she was able to remember the family phone number.

"She did not know where she was and she was afraid," Ted said. "She was never institutionalized long enough to get her on the proper medication."

Sharon suffered from numerous delusions, including fears that the government had devices that constantly tracked her movements, the Diablo sirens were sending her signals, and the Russians were after her.



However, Sharon's greatest fear was that she would be murdered by one of several men she claimed were after her, her friends said.

## **The investigation**

It's been six months since Sharon Ostman's murder, and San Luis Obispo police still don't have any suspects.

"We have a number of very possible motives," said Allison Martinez, lead investigator with SLOPD. "When you have an unlimited suspect base it makes it incredibly difficult to solve the case."

Police bristle at accusations that little is being done because it's just another homeless homicide.

"Just the fact that it was a sexual assault homicide in the center of town, next to the Mission, makes it very concerning," said Sergeant Chris Staley. "A person with those capabilities might be able to do it again." Police Chief Deborah Linden pointed out that as many as 20 detectives have been involved in the case. Many have worked days and nights and weekends, she said, missing their children's school events and family celebrations, traveling from state to state, interviewing witnesses and "people of interest."

Lab results in the case seem to be a bone of contention. Linden said police are at the mercy of the state's overloaded crime lab in Richmond. Though detectives have taken samples of DNA from 40 suspects, police said the lab has not had time to process all the samples nor has it finished processing all the crime scene evidence. Police say it's a matter of who in California has the best possible case that determines lab result priority.

But state crime lab officials claim that they quickly processed all the samples they received on Sharon's case due to the nature of the crime.

"We completed all our work to date on this case back in October, said Gary Sims, case work laboratory director with the Jan Bashinski State Crime Laboratory. "This case was not shelved."

Detective Martinez in response insists that the crime lab is mistaken.

SLO police hope that DNA results will identify the killer, or killers. If not, they hope it's in the form of a confession. Which is why police have not released the cause of Sharon's death, nor the manner in which the crime was committed. They say that would jeopardize their investigation. The autopsy report shows no gun or knife was used in the assault, but there were blunt injuries to the head and major bruises to the body.

Family and friends of Sharon Ostman say the police were slow in coming. Ted says many family members tried to contact police, but were initially ignored.

And Nancy Griffin called the police shortly after the murder and explained that she knew Sharon and that she could give contact information on her family.

"The police said they had already contacted the family," Griffin said. "Sharon's friend Denver told police we had a better picture of Sharon than the mugshot they were using in the paper, but members of the department did not respond back to us."

Nancy also had a duffel bag full of Sharon's writings and other belongings, which was eventually picked up by her daughter. It wasn't until a few weeks ago when Martinez finally stopped by Griffin's house for an interview.

When asked why it took so long to respond, Chief Linden said, "It's a matter of just having way more work and way more leads than we have time and investigators to do. Anything like this you can't get to everyone in a timely manner that would like to be talked to."

Police aren't the only detectives looking for clues. A close-knit, shocked, and frightened street community has done some sleuthing on their own. Many street people told New Times that Sharon would often clash with the homeless drug addicts and was afraid to sleep anywhere near Mission Plaza, where the meth freaks gathered.

They also mentioned that Sharon was physically strong and quite feisty. Eddie said it would have taken a lot to bring her down. Some on the street think Sharon was attacked by two people.

While a lot of names have been mentioned and theories cast, one consensus is that Sharon was killed by a dangerous speed freak with a chain who goes by the name of Roger. Some say Roger has threatened to kill anyone who spoke to the police regarding the murder. Word from the street is that police are just now looking into it.

Immediately following the discovery of Sharon's body, police solicited help from the media and the public as to her identity. Many residents from all over the county came forward to share their encounters with the generous and wandering woman who had become somewhat of a fixture downtown. But nobody really knew her, how she got here, or where she came from. Nobody except her four children, ex-husband, sister, and two brothers, most of whom claim many of their initial calls to police went unheeded.

Soon after Sharon's murder police posted a \$1,000 reward for information leading to arrest and conviction of the killer. So far, no one has come forward. And police have little to go on. Detective Martinez does not know if Sharon's attacker has already been questioned.

"Sharon Ostman was killed in a brutal fashion," said Chief Linden, who maintains her investigators are still doing everything possible.

Eddie Simmer sure hopes so, if only to arrest the fear that still exists on the streets.

He said the last time he saw Sharon she told him, "I'll see you tomorrow."

Simmer returned the next morning to find police swarming the area where Sharon planned to sleep, soon to discover that the woman found murdered in the creek turned out to be his best friend.

"She had a heart of gold and she didn't deserve this," Simmer said. "She was benign; she would never hurt anybody."

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# News of the Week

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What the County's Talking About This  
Week

**BY NEW TIMES STAFF**

Date: 07/14/2005

## **Murdered homeless woman found in creek**

San Luis Obispo police have confirmed that a homeless woman, whose partially clothed body was discovered about 6 a.m. Monday morning in the city's downtown creek, was murdered.

Captain Dan Blanke, with the city's police department, described Sharon Ostman, 59, as a "well known" figure in the downtown business community. However, aside from confirming that there were visible wounds on Ostman's body when she was found, Blanke was unable to answer any questions about how the woman died, her past, or any leads the police are following.

The morning after Ostman's body was found, the crime scene directly below the Mission Mall painted a gruesome picture of what police found early Monday morning.

Investigators' notations on the walkway showed that Ostman was discovered lying on her back in the creek, her head facing downstream. Other notes on the concrete showed where her shoes might have been found, where a chunk of glass lay. Close to where the body lay, an inked line outlined a large, faintly red stain. Other, smaller outlines around similar reddish marks led upstream on the walkway. The word "smear" was written next to several of the marks.

Police believe Ostman was killed late Sunday, July 10, or early Monday and are asking anyone who saw her over that weekend to call 549-7867. ?

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# The on-going hunt for Sharon Ostman's killer

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**NT** [m.newtimeslo.com/sanluisobispo/the-on-going-hunt-for-sharon-ostmanandacircandeuoandtrades-](http://m.newtimeslo.com/sanluisobispo/the-on-going-hunt-for-sharon-ostmanandacircandeuoandtrades-)

It has been eight months since 59-year-old Sharon Ostman's half-naked body was discovered partially submerged in San Luis Obispo Creek downtown near the Mission. She had been savagely beaten, sexually assaulted, and murdered. For the last 20 years of her life, Ostman wandered the streets of SLO, homeless, weathered, and confused. Police and members of a frightened and vulnerable street community are still searching for her killer.



# When Ostman's body was discovered during the early morning hours of July 11, 2005, there were signs of blunt force trauma to her head and bruises over much of her body. Her teeth were smashed, her tongue was bruised and her mouth was filled with blood. Ostman's autopsy report shows no gun or knife was used, though the exact cause of death has been redacted from the report. SLO police hope any future confession will conform to this withheld information .

While a number of suspects have been mentioned and many theories cast, the strongest (but still-developing) scenario, based upon an ongoing investigation by New Times, is that Ostman was killed and then robbed by at least two, and possibly three, dangerous methamphetamine addicts. Ostman was known to have received a large disability check, and her friends claim that she was in possession of approximately \$1,700 the night she was

murdered. Very little money was found on her body, police say.

Since the beginning of this year, several people have contacted New Times saying that a transient identified as Hippie G openly confessed to Ostman's murder to a group at a homeless encampment known as the Hooch in Albany, Oregon.

One, named Annie, told New Times in January, "He said he killed the religious bitch because she was a narc." Annie then described how horrified residents of the camp became enraged and allegedly killed the confessed murderer. In February, another woman, whom we'll call Sue, related an eerily similar story of a man who claimed to have killed a female police informant in SLO. Sue said the angry and frightened group then dragged the man from the encampment, beat him, and threw stones at him, though she said he survived the attack and was seen at a homeless shelter a few weeks later. Police think Hippie G, a known meth addict, may still be in the Albany area.

Another visitor to the Hooch sometime after Ostman's death was a black transient named Whitey, who was treated to dinner by Ostman at Woodstock's Pizza just hours before her death. Friends report Ostman flashed a large amount of cash when she paid for the meal.

According to Sue, Whitey was seen staying at the Hooch with his girlfriend Abby. "She told me Whitey and Hippie G each took \$500 off Sharon's body," Sue said. "Abby is afraid Whitey is going to get caught." New Times has learned that Whitey and Abby were last seen heading for Nevada.

Another transient speed freak who may be involved in the murder goes by the name of Roger; Roger carried a chain and was known to dislike Ostman. Eddie Simmers, Ostman's long-time friend and one of the last people to see her alive, says that Hippie G and Roger approached him a few weeks after Sharon's murder. "They came off on me, said I was working for the cops, told me to talk about nothing," Eddie says. "Hippie G wanted to fight. He is a violent SOB."

Just this week, a police detective and an investigator from the District Attorney's office questioned Simmers for approximately two hours concerning Sharon's death. "The police asked about Hippie G and Whitey," Eddie said. "They told me they think Hippie G killed Sharon."



# Arrest made in 2005 murder

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 [mustangnews.net/arrestmadeinmurder/](http://mustangnews.net/arrestmadeinmurder/)

Aaron Gaudette

December 2, 2

Police arrested a man believed to be responsible for the July 2005 murder of Sharon Ostman on Feb. 11, according to a San Luis Obispo Police Department press release.

Ostman's body was found on July 11, 2005 in the creek area below Mission Plaza, and the ensuing investigation led officials to establish that Ostman had been the victim of a homicide.

Meticulous scrutiny of all variables ultimately enabled police to link 54-year-old Freddie Joe Lewis of San Luis Obispo, a registered sex offender, with the murder and detain him, police said.

The case involved months of exhaustive investigation focused on the examination of a large volume of physical evidence gathered from the crime scene, as well as more than 130 interviews with witnesses and persons of interest.

Those interviews included known registered sex offenders and took investigators several weeks, leading them to places as far away as Nevada, Oregon and Florida.

"We'll typically interview all sex offenders in the city of the homicide, as they're the people who've already established an abnormal pattern of behavior," said Captain Ian Parkinson of the San Luis Obispo Police Department. "Especially in a case such as this, with no eye witnesses, you have to rely on physical evidence and interviews to try to determine what's of value and tie it to possible suspects."

The murder was prominent news in the San Luis Obispo community, given the fact that the body was discovered in the downtown area and the area's small-town environment.

"Because murders are not very common, they're automatically a big concern of the community when they occur in a small town such as this," said political science professor and San Luis Obispo resident Allen Settle. "Such unfortunate and disturbing crimes can really unsettle a community, especially when there's already many concerns with the men's colony being so close by."

Even students staying in the area over the summer remember the event getting a lot of coverage when it happened.

"Yeah, people were really up at arms about it," said Andrew Rikli, an environmental engineering senior who remained in San Luis Obispo for the summer of 2005. "Growing up in a bigger city, I never saw too much attention devoted to any one crime such as this. But

the attention to the murder made it such a big deal that we'd even hear about it when visiting the beach in Pismo."

A multitude of evidence was gathered from the crime scene by the San Luis Obispo Police Department and the California Department of Justice. Analysis of this evidence took several months due to its large volume as well as other pending cases before the California Department of Justice.

The evidence probe allowed police to link Lewis to the murder in February 2006, making him the prime suspect. Subsequent investigation and developments in the case prompted investigators to establish that he was in fact the one responsible for the murder and issue a warrant for his arrest, police said.

In the period between when Lewis was first considered a suspect and his ultimate apprehension, police and the San Luis Obispo County District Attorney's office remained mindful of the public's safety. Lewis was either in police custody for unrelated parole violations, under police surveillance, or wearing a GPS tracking device during this time.

"Because of his prior criminal record, it was a lot easier to initially identify him and later keep tabs on him," Parkinson said. "Parole violations made it fairly simple to keep an eye on him or just detain him outright."

The investigation furnished police with the necessary warrant to arrest Lewis, and he has been in police custody since. He faces arraignment this week.

The investigation is still underway and officials urge anyone with further information about Freddie Lewis or the Sharon Ostman homicide to contact Crimestoppers at (805) 549-STOP or the San Luis Obispo Police Department tipline at (805) 783-7800.

# A Letter to the Community Homeless Neighbors in Need

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 [hopedance.org/home/housing-news/1233-a-letter-to-the-community-homeless-neighbors-in-need](http://hopedance.org/home/housing-news/1233-a-letter-to-the-community-homeless-neighbors-in-need)

Created: Friday, 21 August 2009 10:05

A Letter to the Community  
Homeless Neighbors in Need  
by *Kathleen S. Ramberg*

What is our response, as a community, when one of our own is not safe? What is our responsibility to one another when there are people amongst us unable to advocate for themselves? If one of us is not safe, are any of us safe? These are questions that our community has been confronted with following the senseless murder of Sharon Ostman.

I spent several hours with Sharon on Thursdays of each week seeking to help provide services for her and the other homeless people in San Luis Obispo. I meet a friend, Michael, downtown and we visit the many places the homeless people spend their time. Many are eager to tell their story of their life and what led to the circumstances they are presently in. There are always stories of family disfunction marked by violence and neglect. There are often stories of alcohol and drug abuse as a means to escape from the past, the present and their sense of failure and rejection from society. Many times, when we listen to them, we are the only people who have interacted with them that day. The need for human contact is very evident.

Sharon had a diagnosed mental illness. She needed to be in a secured place at night where she was safe and where she would be given her medication. When given her medication, her thought process was lucid and articulate. She was well read and freely shared her knowledge of many things. She had a deep faith and enjoyed the wisdom she learned from the Bible. She sought to apply it in her everyday life. I have enjoyed reading letters to the editor in the Telegram Tribune which chronicle acts of kindness Sharon showed towards others. She was like so many of the 'poorest of the poor' in our community who would readily share what they had with someone in need. Homeless people know the need of others because they are directly experiencing the same need.

Women on the street are especially vulnerable to violence and abuse. Where would you or I go at night to find safety if we had no shelter of our own to live in, no family able or willing to take us in, no friends to offer us a bed? We would do what Sharon and the other homeless people do. We would sleep in the donut shop or the post office or a doorway of a church. We would camp by the creek or in a field, hoping to remain unnoticed, or in an abandoned car until it was towed away.

I was with Sharon four days before she died. She was afraid because someone had repeatedly robbed her of money and belongings. She knew his name, but would not disclose it to me. She felt she would be less safe if she did and the police became involved, because she said he would end up back on the street and come straight to her in retaliation. This is the reality she lived in. She made a decision and the decision was fatal.

Sharon had had a studio apartment downtown fairly recently. She was evicted. What had she done to cause this to happen? Had she had wild parties? Had she damaged the place? Had she been loud and rude to her neighbors and landlord? No, none of these things occurred. She was evicted for allowing other women to sleep on the floor in order to help protect them and keep them safe at night.

Are we as a community, willing to provide shelter for the mentally ill? Are we willing to do what Sharon did for others in order to help protect them and keep them safe?

Each time I meet and work with a homeless person, I realize once again that this is someone's mother or someone's father or sister or brother, or aunt or uncle or grandpa or grandmother.....These people share the same humanity we are all a part of. We truly need to understand and act on the truth that we are our brothers (neighbors) keeper. Please contact me if you would like to help address the need to provide more shelter for the homeless in San Luis Obispo then exists at this time.

# A Homeless Woman's Last Gift

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[thestreetspirit.org/October2005/sharon.htm](http://thestreetspirit.org/October2005/sharon.htm)



## STREET SPIRIT

A publication of the American Friends Service Committee

JUSTICE NEWS & HOMELESS BLUES IN THE BAY AREA

Sharon Ostman was brutally murdered in San Luis Obispo. Before her tragic death, the homeless woman taught an unforgettable lesson in kindness and giving.

by Stacey Warde

*Author's note: Recently I was blessed by a homeless woman who gave me a gold coin when I told her things weren't going so well for me. Not long after her gift to me, she was murdered, found dead in San Luis Obispo Creek. On September 9, 2005, it was reported that Sharon Ostman, 59, was battered and sexually assaulted before being murdered on the night of July 10. I wrote this essay before she was killed and later sent it to the local daily as a tribute. The letters in response all told how truly generous Sharon Ostman was, how humane and kind.*

With no money in my pocket, less than \$200 in the bank, and feeling a little bleak, I recently pleaded hardship to a homeless woman asking for a dollar in front of the post office. "I'm sorry, but you're probably better off than I am right now," I said. I climbed into the passenger's side of the car, parked next to the curb.

"Oh," she said with concern, "would you like a dollar?"

I didn't really know what to say, but felt so good about her offer, I laughed. "No, thank you," I said, warmed by her generosity. "I'm sure I'll be okay."

I smiled at the woman as she sat on the bench next to her various cardboard signs expressing need, hoping that I really would be okay. With little prospect of steady employment, and only a few sporadic cash jobs to squeak by, I didn't know if I was going to be okay or not.

Sharon Ostman's genuine concern made me feel I might. She got up from her place on the bench, and came up to the window on the passenger's side of the car.

"Here," she said, handing me a beautiful shiny gold dollar coin, featuring the Shoshone mother with child, Sacagawea. "She's one of my ancestors," Sharon continued. "Give it to a child, if you like."

"Thank you," I said, grateful and delighted. I examined the gold coin as she went back to her place on the bench.

Sacagawea's youthful face, head turned and baby strapped to her back, peered over her shoulder, expressing calmness and confidence. Her image suggested forward movement. Had it not been for Sacagawea, it's said, the historic Lewis and Clark expedition to the Northwest (1804-1806) would have failed. She was smart, resourceful and diplomatic.

None of that really mattered to me at the moment. I was more enthralled with the coin's gold brilliance, and the homeless woman who gave it to me. I also basked in the kindness she had just shown me.

My companion, with whom I had washed windows that morning to earn some much-needed cash, seemed aghast. He didn't recognize Sacagawea. "Is that a Susan B.?" he gasped. "Is that a silver dollar?" he added with emphasis on the "dollar."

"No, Bob, it's a gold coin. Susan B.'s not gold."

"You can't take money from a homeless person!" he exclaimed. "Here," he said, taking a dollar bill out of his wallet, "give her this dollar."

"What do you mean I can't take her dollar? Are you kidding? That was pure generosity," I responded.

She saw the exchange in the car and returned to the passenger's side and stooped down as I passed the thin paper dollar bill into her hand. "Thank you," she said.

And we were off. Since then, I've been much less stingy with my spare change, even when I don't have much to spare. What does it hurt? Actually, I feel so much better extending my hand to pad a homeless person's pocket than I do refusing to offer anything.

Until I met Sacagawea's descendant in front of the post office, I had grown sour with my own bleak circumstances, living hand to mouth, and with bums who wanted to take what little I had. I've heard stories of homeless people standing by the side of busy freeway exits, raking in dollar bills and larger from rush-hour commuters.

"Those guys make more money than I do," a friend once said. "They pull in as much as \$50,000 a year."

"Right on!" I responded. "It's not the way I want to make a living, but if they can do it, more power to them."

Lately, I've been thinking: What's the difference between the homeless woman at the post office and me? Not much, really, except her kindness and generosity. I want to be more like her. I feel better when I'm willing to give than when I'm hoarding what little I have.

And in this day, when the predominant "business" models taught in the university are little more than methodologies of greed, it's revolutionary to give. In that sense, Sharon Ostman revolutionized my thinking and my connection to people in the street. I have nothing to fear, and no need to respond with anger, when I'm willing to give.

And I don't need to buy into the greed and blind hunger rampant in our culture. All of the great spiritual treatises and traditions we cherish point to a different path anyhow. A few seem to truly follow that path, like Sharon at the post office.

I've learned that no matter how little we have, we always have the option to bestow a gift, a blessing. In my mind, that's the best and highest good we can pursue in this life. Thank you, Sharon, for blessing me.