

No One Buried Alone provides a final act of dignity to Palm Beach County's forgotten dead a few times a year

Valentina Palm Palm Beach Post | USA TODAY NETWORK

ROYAL PALM BEACH — In the middle of a clear-skied Wednesday, the Rev. Gabriel Ghanoum bent down to kiss 111 black boxes containing the cremated ashes of people, most of whom he never met.

The remains belonged to the unclaimed bodies of Palm Beach County, and for the last 11 years, Ghanoum has organized their burials. On this day, he knew only three people from the group, whom he counseled days before their deaths at JFK Medical Center in Atlantis.

"I love you," he said to each box, as a man sang Frank Sinatra's "My Way" in the background. "I adopted them. They are now my family."

Ghanoum, the chaplain at JFK who founded Delray Beach's St. Nicholas Melkite Catholic Church, has hosted the No One Buried Alone ceremonies at least twice a year since 2011.

Every four to six months, he collects all the unclaimed ashes around the county and hosts a burial service for them at Our Lady Queen of Peace Cemetery in Royal Palm Beach, where they are later interred.



The Rev. Gabriel Ghanoum at Our Lady Queen of Peace Cemetery in Royal Palm Beach on July 12. Every four to six months, he collects all the unclaimed ashes around the county and hosts a burial service for them at Our Lady Queen of Peace Cemetery, where they are later interred. THOMAS CORDY/THE PALM BEACH POST

'They die without anybody'



Ghanoum's reminder of the first child who was interred as part of his Nobody Buried Alone project Tuesday at Our Lady Queen of Peace Cemetery in Royal Palm Beach. The newborn baby was abandoned at a Wellington hospital nearly a decade ago, he said.

person aloud, as Ghanoum pressed his lips against the boxes. A moment of silence followed, then both Catholic and Jewish prayers. A group of 25 volunteers attended the service.

"These were 111 individuals who died alone," said James Green, the community services director at Palm Beach County's Division of Human Services. "They had their own uniqueness and contributions to our community, and we want to honor them and acknowledge their humanness."

Remains were from abandoned infants, homeless, forgotten seniors

Adriana Gorrondona, who supervises case workers at the county agency, says most of the remains belong to abandoned infants, people who died while homeless and seniors forgotten in nursing homes.

She said she receives a call almost every day from county medical examiners to report an unclaimed body.

"They die without anybody, any family, or sometimes they're abandoned," Gorrondona said.

"They might have a relative but they are estranged, and they just don't want to take care of these individuals."

Before Ghanoum began the tradition, the remains of unclaimed bodies in the county often would spend years, even decades, decaying on shelves at local funeral

"It's like integrating humanity and humanness for people who never had the chance to be celebrated," said Ghanoum. "If they would have had love, they wouldn't have been alone."

During the burial ceremony, held at the entrance to Our Lady's chapel, the cemetery staff read the name of each

homes. Now they all receive a burial service and are interred at the chapel's cemetery off Southern Boulevard.

It all began in 2010 when Ghanoum met a 100-year-old patient, Victoria Scalia, who died from cardiac arrest the second day she arrived at JFK's intensive care unit. He reached out to the nursing home where Scalia lived, but the staff there said she didn't have any family.

He wondered, "What happens to the remains of the unclaimed bodies in the county?" He called Gorrondona, who spends days trying to reach their family members.

Looking for loved ones. 'More often than not, we don't find anyone'

When a person dies alone in Palm Beach County, she said, local authorities are responsible for the body. After a call from a medical examiner with information on the deceased, a team of county Human Services caseworkers sets out on the mission of finding someone who will claim them.

"More often than not, we don't find anyone," said Gorrondona, who started working as a caseworker in the department almost 20 years ago. "It's very sad."

After they conclude their investigation, the bodies are sent for cremation to local funeral homes, which are required to keep their ashes for 120 days before

discarding them. She said most facilities kept the remains for years hoping someone might claim them.

Gorrondona at one point felt dissatisfied with her job. She wanted to do more for all those people whom she couldn't find love and care for. Ghanoum couldn't believe it when he learned of all those who go unclaimed. He had to do something.

They approached Tom Sheldon, the cemetery's administrator, and the three founded the No One Buried Alone Ministry.

It started with the burial of a woman whose ashes were kept for 70 years

During the first ceremony in May 2011, they buried the ashes of a woman who died in 1938. Her remains had stayed inside the closet of a local funeral home for about 70 years. Born in 1860, she is still the oldest person buried at the cemetery.

Ever since, the ceremony is Gorrondona's most fulfilling part of her job.

"It's the one thing I'm most proud of working for Palm Beach County," she said. "Everybody at one point in their life was somebody's child, somebody's mother, somebody's father. That's what I think when I see all those urns."

For her, it shows the willingness of the county government not only to provide services to these forgotten people but also to do it in a way that brings them dignity. The consistent support of the people who attend the services held two or three times a year still surprises her.

"You realize that the people that come to those ceremonies are coming to pay respects for people that they never met," Gorrondona said. "That speaks volumes of the community that we have in Palm Beach County."

Pamela Saavedra, a University of Miami medical student interning at JFK, says burials are for the living, not for the dead. She stood for the two hours of the burial service.

"The fact that they didn't have anyone to mourn them makes this very symbolic," she said. "It shows they aren't really alone, that even if they are not here, they will be remembered."

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The Rev. Gabriel Ghanoum in front of a crypt that is part of his No One Buried Alone project at Our Lady Queen of Peace Cemetery in Royal Palm Beach on July 12. THOMAS CORDY/THE PALM BEACH POST