

Homeless Man Dies After Attack

Ross Stiles, 43, Hit with 40-Oz. Bottle and Later Dies; Police on Lookout for Suspects

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A homeless man named Ross Stiles died of a massive head injury Wednesday night and Santa Barbara police say the case could be a homicide.

Stiles' friends on the street have little doubt on that point, however, since two of them witnessed him being hit over the head with a 40-ounce bottle of beer on Sunday night and then heard him complain of a headache the next day. On Tuesday morning, when his symptoms progressed even further, one of them called an ambulance.

Santa Barbara Police Department spokesperson Sgt. Lorenzo Duarte said police followed the ambulance Tuesday to the 600 block of Cabrillo Boulevard, where Stiles regularly camped, and found him complaining of a headache. Though he did not say anything about the assault, his buddies revealed that Stiles had been struck after the ambulance left with Stiles inside. After speaking with the companions, police went to Cottage Hospital to question Stiles, but he was "unresponsive" when they arrived, Duarte said. Doctors told police there was "massive swelling" in him brain and that he needed emergency surgery. Stiles died of his injuries the following night around 8:30 p.m.

During Thursday afternoon's downpour, a dozen or so homeless men and women were digesting the sad news while attempting to stay dry beneath a shelter by an East Beach playground. A blue-eyed man named Randall was visibly distraught as he lit a cigarette. He was one of the ones who saw Sunday's incident.

"Ross was my friend," he said tearfully. He explained that he and a friend were on their way back from the store Sunday night and, when they got close to the Cabrillo restrooms, noticed "three people were standing up. Two of them looked like they were hugging. Then all of a sudden, I hear a pop and glass [was all around]." Randall did not give his last name but described two of the men as Hispanic; one around 5' 8" and skinny, the other heavy set and about 5'6". The third man, the one who was stuck, was 43-year-old Stiles.

Ross Stiles is asked some general questions by social worker Ken Williams while volunteer physician Lynne Jahnke checks medical forms.

Back at the Cabrillo Boulevard restrooms on Thursday, Santa Barbara police investigators were interviewing an older looking man named Rodney, Stiles' camping companion—or "road dog" in street lingo. Rodney told *The Independent* that he was sleeping Sunday evening when the fight occurred. But when he awakened Monday morning, the first thing Ross said was, "My head is sore. Okay, I got clocked."

Rodney and a few of the other homeless who hang out near the restrooms were taken to the police department Tuesday morning to answer more questions. "I'm always willing to offer information when somebody killed a friend of mine," said Rodney.

In the sitting room of Casa Esperanza Thursday after lunch, Robert Evans, 52, said he camped with Stiles for several years. "He was a real nice guy," Evans said. "Always friendly, always had a smile." Homeless outreach worker Ken Williams said Stiles had been on the streets here around seven years. He suffered from severe depression and chronic pain resulting from a disability. He could not move very well, Williams said. Both problems likely contributed to his alcoholism.

Nobody knows much about Stiles' background. The homeless rarely share details of family, according to Williams. But the case has many similarities to last year's beating death of Gregory Ghan in Isla Vista. On May 31, 2008, Ghan, who was also a longtime homeless person, was sleeping in the doorway of the Isla Vista Medical Clinic. Sometime in the very early hours of that morning, students passing by noticed him prone, bloody, and moaning by the entryway and called 911. He lapsed into a coma from injuries sustained in a presumed beating shortly after arriving at Cottage Hospital and was removed from life support by family 10 days later.

Sheriff's investigators have interviewed many people in relation to Ghan's death, and know much about what happened that night, but they have not made an arrest as of yet.

Santa Barbara police said it is unknown whether the injuries from Stiles' alleged assault caused death but that an autopsy would be performed to gather more information. They said they are following every lead and that if anyone had any information about this case to please call 897-2300.