

The gentle love and kindness of a street musician



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

The turn of the century was a fruitful time at the street chaplaincy. We held weekly “wellness” meetings with dinner, regular “spiritual” gatherings, frequent memorial circles and annual Thanksgiving Eve services. We planted a Japanese maple tree from the Zen farm in front of the Catholic mission church next to a stone commemorating all neighbors who died homeless on the streets of the county.

Everything we did as a chaplain team, board and volunteers was religiously inclusive. We lived and breathed the full meaning of interfaith or multi-faith. The board was led at various times by Protestant and Catholic Christians, a Jewish woman and a Buddhist priest. Our staff consisted of women and men and always included either someone from the “street community” or someone who had “been there.” Since I myself had experienced housing challenges for brief periods, I was especially sensitive to “people who get it” – those who personally understood what it feels like to have no stable, permanent home.

After years as a jail chaplain, I was about two years into my new position as street chaplain when Frank appeared. A former nightclub owner, Frank was a very accomplished musician and composer. With his bald head, thin frame, gentle smile and walking stick, he was

known by some as “Buddha Frank.” He was a natural as a chaplaincy volunteer assisting his peers on the street and bringing people to us who needed more help.

One morning he brought in a shy young woman. Frank was concerned she was vulnerable to abuse on the street. Another day he led an older man in to see me. Frank explained the man’s tent had been rained out and he needed someplace warm and safe.

This was a productive period for Frank. His creativity was contagious. Other musicians started coming around to jam, share their original creations, enlivening our gatherings. At times the tiny chaplaincy office in the back of a large church felt more like a music studio or hang out for artists.

During the time he was with us, Frank composed “Our Song,” “Open Up Your Heart to Love,” “Faces in the Dark,” “Walk in the Light,” “Gentle Love,” “Peace Time is Now” and other works. Each song was Frank’s way of speaking to the realities of life on the streets, with an uplifting message of hope.

Inviting Frank to perform his music in weekly groups and local congregations was an inspiration for everyone. His bright appearance, heartfelt words and raspy voice “put a face on homelessness.” When I was speaking in a congregation and Frank played, the beauty of the words, his voice, his playing stunned us all. The congregation would no doubt remember Frank’s presence and his music much longer than anything I said that day. This was the kind of education the community most



One guitar Frank played. CHRIS HIGHLAND/SPECIAL TO ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

needed – unforgettable lessons in the faces, stories, artistic creations of real people on the edges of our towns and the edges of our consciousness.

As Frank was getting more involved with the chaplaincy he also was getting weaker. His medical issues slowed him down and he became more depressed. When I saw him last, at his new apartment, he was looking very thin and frail though he still managed to smile and show concern for other people we knew “out there.” He’d collected many instruments but I couldn’t imagine he had the

energy to play them anymore. As he hugged me (Frank hugged everyone), I felt sad for him, though he put on a good face.

I have a memory of Frank sitting in the office, picking up my old Martin guitar, and making the instrument sound the way a guitar is supposed to sound. His voice would strain – he could never sing loudly – but the melodic tones and gentleness of his style made everyone stop to listen.

After I left the chaplaincy I learned Frank had died. Over the years I’ve kept some of his songs in a music folder. Now and then I take them out and think of Frank, remembering him singing for a friend’s memorial, a Sunday gathering in the park or an interfaith service. I can’t help smiling and humming one of his tunes.

He first sang “Gentle Love” at a memorial for a young man who worked for a local social service agency. In some ways, I think the simplicity of the song reveals the profoundly kind nature of Frank himself: “We’ve gotta have a great love, for humankind. Live the way of love and truth, we shall find. Gentle love, will see us through. Gentle love, is tried and true. We’ve gotta have a great love, for ourselves. Before we can share our love, with someone else. Gentle love will see us through.”

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.