

PROFILE: TOM SAWYER



Tom Sawyer & Ikebana © Andrew Owen A01

In March 2010, Thomas Sawyer died from internal injuries in a downtown Vancouver alley under what police called “suspicious circumstances.” The cause of death was “multiple blunt force injuries.” He was 55.

Sawyer was well known in downtown Vancouver, where he often sold or gave away flowers, and was affectionately known as the ‘Flower Man.’ He had a large number of loyal customers who appreciated his sense of humour and philosophical musings.

“He was a very peaceful, gentle guy, and knew everything there was to know about plants,” said Judy Graves, the former homeless advocate for the City of Vancouver. “Before he had a place to sell flowers he would get them out of the gardens in the Bentall Centre and then sell them to the movie crowd, and I would always buy them even though I was allergic.”

What most people didn’t know about Sawyer was that he had a wild and adventurous past. A child of the ‘60s, he often travelled around North and South America with just a few dollars in his pocket. His famous name often got him in trouble with the police, who thought he was being cheeky. He eventually settled down in Mexico, where he got married and had a son.

“If he had been living inside that night, he would not have died.”

— Judy Graves

But something terrible happened to Sawyer in Mexico and he returned to Canada in the mid-1990s, damaged and hurt. His brother, Doug, said he wasn’t the same again. Sawyer would stay with his brother from time to time, or in Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels. But fiercely independent, he began to reject any support and spent the last decade of his life on Vancouver’s streets.

“He refused to have anything do with the welfare system and once that stopped then he couldn’t afford to rent anything,” said Doug Sawyer. “What he needed was something other than a welfare cheque to pay the rent and some sort of safe housing.”

Tom Sawyer struggled with some personal issues, but Graves was working with him to get him into housing before he died. “He had decided he was too old for the streets and it was time to come in,” said Graves. “It wasn’t for a lack of effort to get him in, it was a lack of housing.”

“There’s always a reason why somebody makes that choice to stay on the streets, and with Tom at that point it was a moral judgment that he placed on himself that he didn’t think he deserved to be on welfare so he cut himself off,” she added.

The Vancouver Police Department has not been able to determine exactly how Sawyer died. It is possible that he was the victim of a hit and run or an assault, or fell from a height. But one thing is for certain: being homeless put him in a much more vulnerable position.

— By Sean Condon