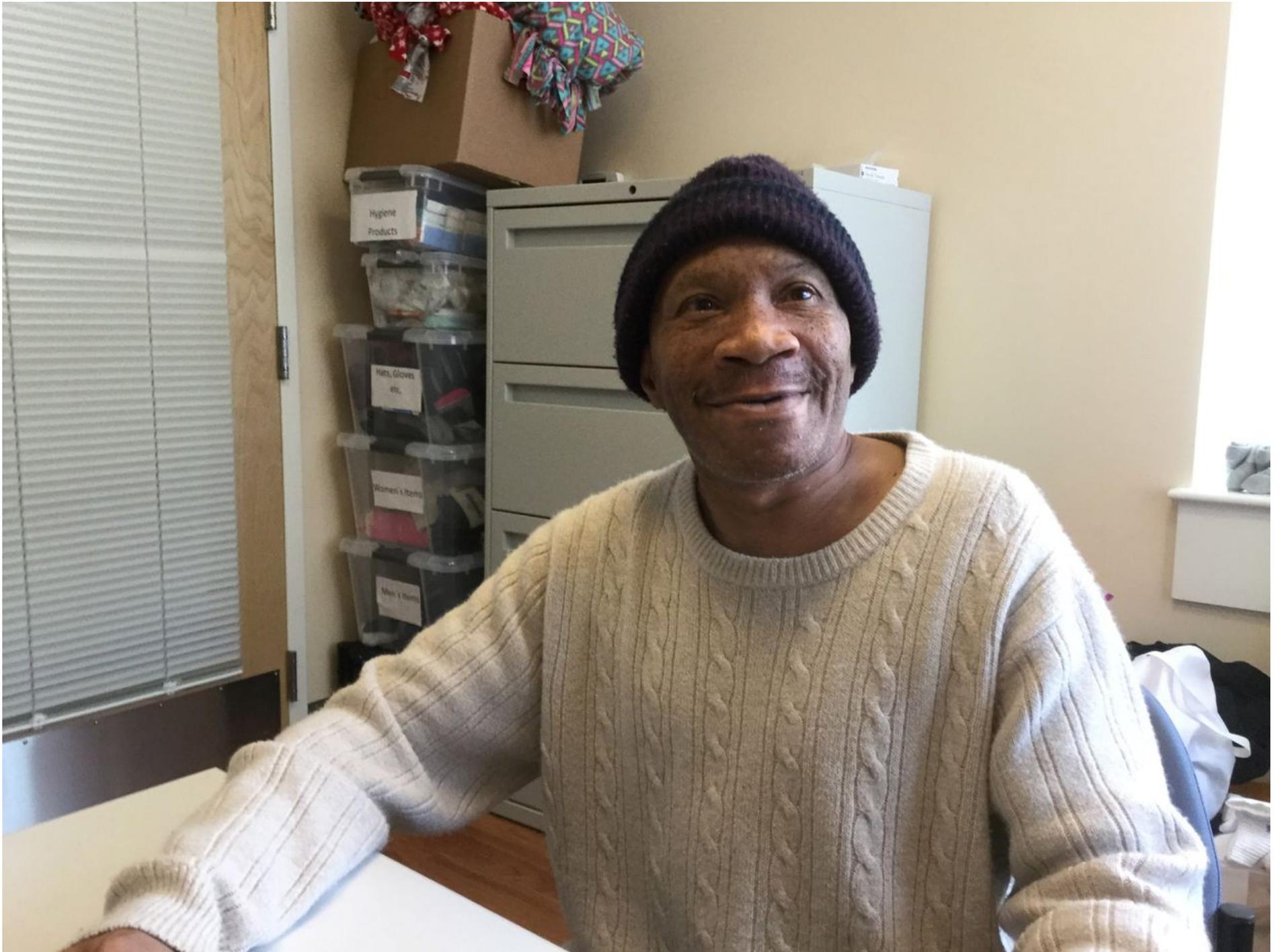


A requiem for Mikey Henry, the pope of Beacon Hill

A fixture on Beacon Hill for decades, Mikey Henry was homeless but far from friendless.

By [Kevin Cullen](#) Globe Columnist, Updated January 19, 2023, 6:50 p.m.



Until five years ago, Mikey Henry was a denizen of the streets. GLOBE STAFF

Mikey Henry liked to think of himself as the richest man on Beacon Hill.

It had nothing to do with money or possessions. For most of his adult life, Mikey was penniless and homeless. He slept outside, often on the benches of Boston Common. He survived on the kindness of strangers, panhandling.

Many of those strangers became friends, and those brief, daily interactions with friends, for years outside the Starbucks at the corner of Beacon and Charles, were what made Mikey's life rich.

He was the pope of Beacon Hill.

"I know everybody, and everybody knows me," he liked to say.

Around Beacon Hill, it wasn't an idle boast.

Michael Henry, universally known as Mikey, was born in Greenville, S.C., and came to Boston as a teenager with his mother to escape his abusive father. Eventually, his father tracked them down to the South End.

"I moved in with my father, to keep him away from my mother," [Mikey told me in 2018.](#)

After his father died, Mikey's uncle stayed with him for a while, but then moved back south. Mikey couldn't afford the rent and was evicted. That was more than 40 years ago, and Mikey spent all but the last five years on the street.

That's where, on a cold winter's night in 1986, he met Dr. Jim O'Connell, the founder of Boston Health Care for the Homeless. Mikey was standing at the Boston Common garage kiosk. O'Connell was struck by Mikey's charisma and resolute determination to avoid shelters.

“Mikey couldn’t read or write, but he could read people,” said Robert Taylor, one of Mikey’s friends. “He made people want to help him.”

Taylor, an architect, was reluctant to give Mikey cash when he was panhandling, fearing it might fund bad habits. But he couldn’t help but like Mikey, who continued to greet him cordially on the street. When Mikey asked Taylor to oversee his Social Security benefits, Taylor quickly agreed.

Six years ago, Mikey felt bumps on his clavicle and went to see Jim O’Connell. They found prostate cancer had spread throughout his body. O’Connell persuaded Mikey to go to Massachusetts General Hospital, and was moved to tears watching nurses and doctors there treat Mikey with compassion and respect.

Mikey’s illness had a silver lining: He allowed two members of the Boston Health Care for the Homeless street team, Beckie Tachick and Rich Nickerson, to find him an apartment. For the last five years, Mikey lived in relative comfort in Jamaica Plain, with a TV and his cat, Lila.

O’Connell and the author Tracy Kidder, who wrote [a book about O’Connell’s work](#), had to bring a meatball sub as the price of admission to Mikey’s apartment.

“Mikey put us to work,” O’Connell said, “moving things around his apartment.”

Mikey would sometimes go back to his old haunts, panhandling around Beacon Hill and the Common, just to prove he still had the touch. But he was happy in his apartment.

The cancer came back recently. Mikey started losing weight. He asked O’Connell to bring something to the Mass General oncology unit.

“He asked for a Big Mac, no lettuce,” O’Connell said. “He had a huge smile as he chomped his Big Mac. This is a guy who enjoyed each moment, not knowing what they next day would bring.”

Near the end, he worried only about Lila the cat. Mikey was 67 years old and weighed 70 pounds when he died last month.

A man who lived on the streets of Boston for more than 40 years left behind hundreds of friends.

In a world that is sometimes too uncaring and selfish, Mikey brought out the best in others. He made people care.

The Rev. Colin Leitch, a pastor at [Church on the Hill](#) on Bowdoin Street, befriended Mikey and will preside over his memorial service at the church, Friday at 11 a.m.

“Michael’s ashes will be scattered around Beacon Hill,” Leitch wrote in a eulogy. “A monument, if you will, to the unseen. Michael Henry, come and gone.”

Kevin Cullen is a Globe columnist. He can be reached at kevin.cullen@globe.com.