

They came for many reasons, but the same goal: bury the baby with dignity



JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Franciscan Friars pause over over the baby's casket.

By [Evan Allen](#)

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The priest asked God to speak through him before he entered the chapel, faced the tiny white casket, and gave the baby her name.

For days, Father Richard Flaherty had wondered: Where did you come from, little one? He would have wanted to sit with her family, and say: Tell me how you loved her. But there was no one to ask. Whoever brought her into life had vanished without claiming her body.

She was alone except for the 23 strangers who gathered on a cold day at the end of January in a small, still chapel in St. Anthony Shrine downtown. Friars in brown habits folded their hands; a man bowed his head. A grandmother sat in the front pew, her cane close, her fingertips light on the dark wood rail in front of her.

The casket, as small as a shoe box, lay in the center of the chapel, blue light falling around from the bright, cerulean stained-glass windows. Soon, the chapel would fill with incense smoke and the people would rise, but this moment was a held breath.

None of them would ever know this baby's story. It didn't matter. She was lost, and they had come so that she would be found. A cantor waited, on the edge of song.

The baby was stillborn in Lowell on Oct. 24, 2018, according to her death certificate. Her body was taken to the medical examiner's office on Albany Street in Boston and placed in a cooler while officials tried to reach her next of kin. No one came.

And so the medical examiner called the Lazarus Ministry at St. Anthony Shrine, a Franciscan Catholic charity that has held 182 funerals and memorials for the poor and abandoned since it began in 2003. Often, the dead are adults who battled addiction, homelessness, or mental illness. But about a third are babies, mostly stillborn, whose parents — poor, addicted, incarcerated, suffering some other sorrow, or simply unknown — left their bodies in the custody of the state. No one at the ministry knows anything of the babies' parents. But they pray for them.

The body of this baby, like many of them, went to Dolan Funeral Home in Milton, which has made the dignified burial of these children a calling. Embalmer Bill O'Brien picked her up from Albany Street in a hearse and brought her to the gleaming white preparatory room in the basement, turned on the television news, and began to wash her body.

Bill has four children of his own, three girls and a boy, but when he is working he is careful not to think of them. He can still remember the first baby he worked on. It was 1984, his son was 6 weeks old. As Bill embalmed the dead boy, all he could think was, this could have been my child.

He did not let himself wonder about this little girl. Later, with the voices of news anchors rising and falling in the background, he dressed her in a diaper, a onesie, a white dress, and a hat.

Then she waited, until Jan. 25, when funeral director Jed Dolan carried her casket into the chapel at the shrine. The baby funerals make him think of his sons, their baseball games and laughter, the fine brown dirt of the diamond. The pleasure of watching two good boys grow tall. He had covered this child with a knit

blanket, tucked a teddy bear at her side, and closed the casket lid. He took his place in a pew toward the back as the seats around him slowly filled.

The service was private. The mourners were friars, shrine staff, and donors. Most come regularly to the baby funerals. The Mass began, and they sang and prayed and read from the Book of Lamentations. Father Richard kissed his Order of Christian Funerals and began his homily:

“Death is not easy for any of us . . . ”

In the front pew, Alice Megna remembered the hymns she sang her grandson before he died just shy of 2 years old. Alexander and his blue eyes, his wagon rides, his delight at blown bubbles, and the sound of popcorn popping. The evenings she held him in the hospital, as the cancer spread through his tiny body, her voice carrying them away together. He'd spent 250 nights in the hospital, not a single one by himself. Alice is a regular now at these St. Anthony rites. She was the first to arrive for this little girl's funeral.

Across the chapel, Maryanne Rooney-Hegan thought of the mother of this baby. Was she a 30-year-old woman? A 12-year-old girl? She imagined the Blessed Mother holding the child in heaven, and her own mother beside them, and knew the child was loved. But the child's mother — what torture did she feel? To lose the baby, and to let the baby go?

They would all carry this child with them. Julie Ogden, director of the Lazarus Ministry, had thought of her as she drifted off to sleep the night before. The babies she has helped bury are always there with her, but the burden isn't heavy. It's a joy.

This baby had arrived in the chapel without even the grace of a name on her death certificate. Now, Father Richard, his vestment white to symbolize hope, swept from behind the lectern and reached out his hand.

“Angela,” he said, his voice deep and gentle. “We never got to meet you. And yet we meet you now as our sister.” Father Richard was 76 years old. He would never have a child of his own, but here was Angela, and here he was ushering her into and out of this world. “May you now know peace and happiness and contentment.”

Her name came from a friar who lived at the shrine. Brother Paul O'Keeffe's mother was named Angela, and she spent 15 years toward the end of her life ministering to people on hospice who were afraid to die. She offered friendship. They had questions about God. She sat with them even if she had no answers.

In the chapel there was silence. Father Richard walked to the chair next to the casket, sat down, and closed his eyes. The casket was draped with a pall Alice had donated; butterflies stitched into it floated brightly

above Angela's body. A full minute passed.

Then the music swelled. Father Richard stood and accepted the brass thurible burning with incense from another friar, swinging it by its chain back and forth around the casket. "My prayers burn before you like burning incense going up to heaven," he thought, and was comforted.

The baritone voice of the cantor started low: "Gentle woman . . . "

And then it was Alice's voice, climbing above the gathering chorus with the words to the hymn she had sung to Alexander every night she spent with him, her love as fresh and fierce as it had been the day he was born, spilling over now for Angela: "Quiet light, morning star, so strong and bright . . . "

The chapel was hazy with smoke that never quite cleared.

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