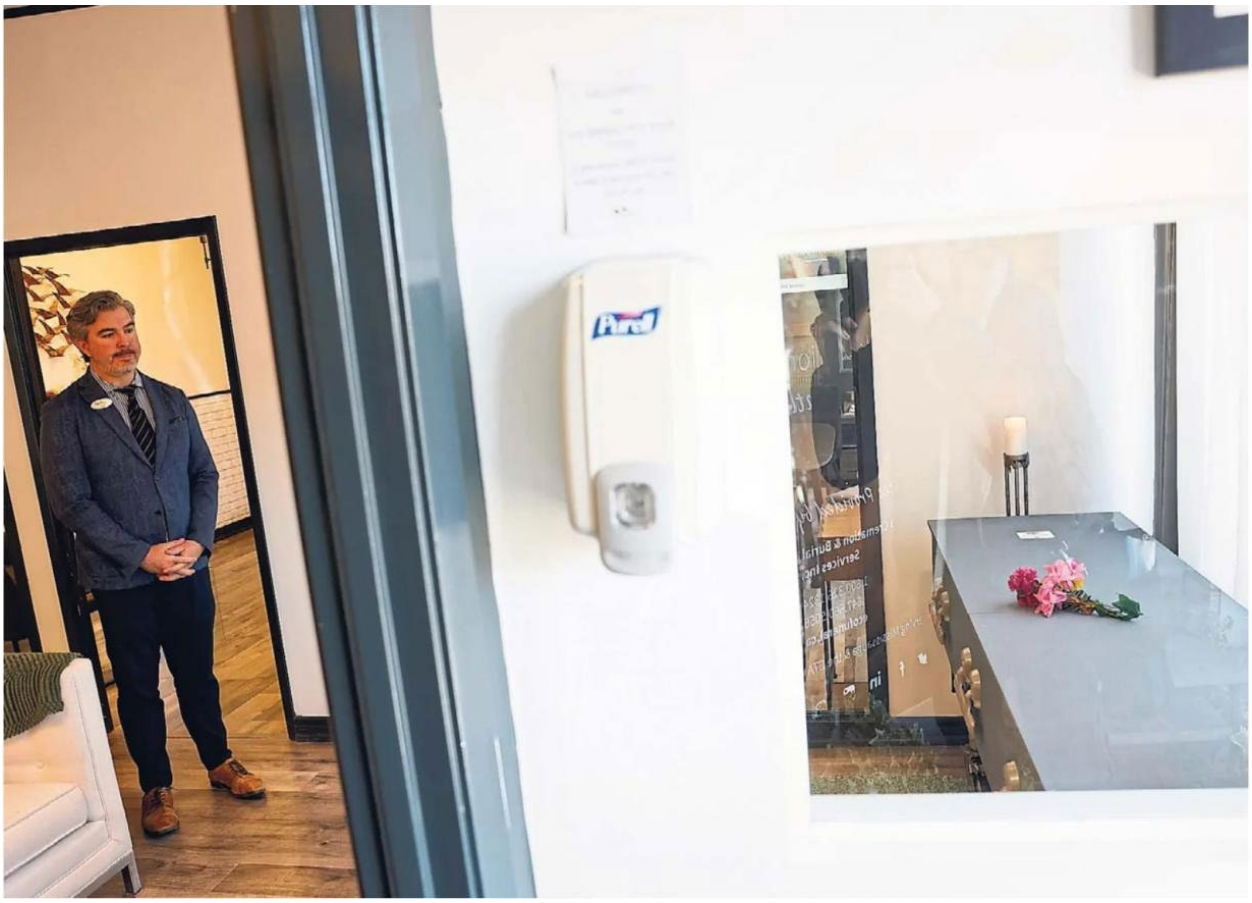
TORONTO STAR

No friends, no family, no problem

How volunteer pallbearers honour our unclaimed citizens



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26 Apr 2026

Earlier this month, Ronald was buried on a sunny day in section 35 of Meadowvale Cemetery in Brampton. His four pallbearers emerged from their cars and took their positions at the back of the hearse. Each of them grabbed a curlicued handle and began the trek over the rain-softened grass to Ronald's grave.

Volunteer pallbearers, led by Nathan Romagnoli and Danyelle Cote of eco Cremation & Burial Services, carry the casket of unclaimed citizen Ronald to his gravesite at the Meadowvale cemetery in Brampton.

This interment was, however, a little different than most: none of Ronald's pallbearers had ever met him.

Ronald was laid to rest by volunteer pallbearers. He died on Jan. 11. For almost three months, no family or friends claimed his body. He became an unclaimed citizen — buried by the volunteer pallbearer program run by eco Cremation & Burial Services.

The fee paid by the government for unclaimed-citizen and socially assisted burial services has been unchanged for years and is below industry standard, so many funeral homes and cemeteries refuse to take them on, according to eco owner Nathan Romagnoli.

He feels everyone deserves a little kinship on their last day above ground — and their first day below it — so in 2014, he started the volunteer pallbearer program to help offset the cost of these burials and ensure that people like Ronald aren't alone at the very end.

"Our volunteer pallbearer program came out of a desperate need for help because, as I like to say, the deceased people can't carry themselves to their own grave," he says.

Romagnoli has considered coming up with a machine that could help with this task, but there's nothing like human hands. "This gives (volunteers) an opportunity to partake in something that not only fulfils the need (to bury unclaimed citizens), but also gives them an ability to feel good about a duty that they're doing for their fellow neighbour."

The number of unclaimed Ontarians is skyrocketing. According to the Office of the Chief Coroner, the total spiked from 438 in 2019 to a record 1,710 in 2025. Some have to wait for up to a year or more to be buried.

Every time an unclaimed citizen comes his way, Romagnoli emails his list of 30 or so volunteer pallbearers. Each burial requires six volunteer pallbearers to heft the casket into the hearse and then lug it over to the grave. His company has performed more than 100 unclaimed-citizen burials over the past dozen years.

On Ronald's burial day, three volunteer pallbearers gathered at the eco office. The company is housed in a small single-storey brick strip mall in the middle of industrial Mississauga. Here, death is as much a part of day-to-day life as picking out kitchen cabinets at the outlet next door or attending a wedding at the banquet hall across the way.

Romagnoli's silver Porsche sits in the parking lot, a For Sale sign on the dash and a licence plate that reads UNDRT8K. Venture inside and you're soothed by vibrant signs

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DERRICK VALENZUELA VOLUNTEER PALLBEARER

of life: white doves Sandra and Bernie coo to each other in a large ornate cage, and resident "comfort cat" Miss Kittieface may wend her way past your legs.

Ronald is already there, resting beside the window in his handsome slate-blue closed casket. Several of the volunteer pallbearers today either work in the funeral industry or aspire to, but most on the roster are just regular people who want to help out a fellow citizen.

"Even if there's no one there to remember you, it's important for us as a human collective in a community to take care of those who get forgotten," says volunteer pallbearer Derrick Valenzuela, who is working to enter the death-care sector himself. "And at least remember and acknowledge that life existed, because if we don't, then it really means nothing, and what does that say about us as humanity and as a culture?"

Romagnoli takes his place next to the casket, white tapers surrounding a lit candle in a small stand by his side. “Today we’re here for Ronald, who is unclaimed, meaning that he doesn’t have anybody to be here,” he says. “So it’s very meaningful for you to be volunteering your time.”

(Only Ronald’s first name is used, to protect his privacy.) Romagnoli encourages the pallbearers to come up and pluck an unlit candle and light it, “as a tribute to Ronald.”

This is Jessica Naumovski’s first time being a volunteer pallbearer. “I wanted to do something kind for someone who is vulnerable and unable to advocate for themselves,” she says.

The newly formed pallbearer team then files outside to the parking lot, where they arrange themselves on either side of the back of the hearse and load in the casket. Romagnoli then drives Ronald to the cemetery, slowly, flashers on all the way.

The volunteers follow in solemn procession. Ronald will be interred in a newer area of the cemetery; it is not a potter’s field but rather just another sector that will fill up with citizens claimed and unclaimed alike. Ronald’s grave is, however, double the depth; in the GTA you have roommates even after you’re dead.

The fourth team member, Michelle Frizza, is waiting on the road beside Ronald’s plot. She has returned many times to volunteer. Romagnoli believes that, with the world in turmoil, people really yearn to tap into their human goodness — into purpose.

“We’re all searching for something that’s meaningful in our life, whether that’s in our interpersonal relationships or in our workplace,” he said. “So I truly don’t think that there’s anything more vivid or raw that can connect you to mankind the way that this duty does, and I think that that’s what draws most of our people to it.”

Heather Medhurst finds volunteer pallbearing especially meaningful coming out of Easter and Passover, given the holidays’ mandates to love one another; that is a philosophy she tries to live by yearround. She saw a meme once that said, “We’re just essentially all walking each other home.” And so, she says, “(today) I think we are walking our neighbour home.”

The volunteer pallbearers place Ronald atop the electric pulley system that will bury him. One person places a few flowers on it; others strew some clods of dirt over the lid.

“Generally we find that people, when they’ve made that physical connection to the casket, knowing that individual’s body is inside, this connects the dots a little bit more on a human level,” Romagnoli says.

A few volunteers murmur good wishes for Ronald, noting how beautiful the day is. Romagnoli’s fellow funeral director Danyelle Cote reads a poem. Then, a cemetery worker flicks a lever, and Ronald descends into his grave. After the pallbearers leave, the nearby backhoe will cover the casket with soil. Romagnoli points out that Ronald will have a very nice tree to mark his spot. A small steel plaque inscribed with “320” is installed on his grave.

The pallbearers make their way back to the eco office; thank-you pizza is ordered and the volunteers chat about funeral school (everyone agrees that the embalming track is better for employability).

The mood is joyful, like old pals catching up. Ronald may not have a gravestone, or kin to claim him. But at the end, he had four people who cared.


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