

Obituary/Etc.

Auburnian's ironic death, like his life, served cause of the people

Walter O'Hagan probably would have been among the first to spot the irony of circumstances surrounding his own death.



In Washington, D.C., for a conference on labor and religion, Mr. O'Hagan was crossing a six-lane road in front of his son's home in Silver Spring, Md., when he was struck by a car and killed on Wednesday, Jan. 25, 1989. His son Tom, president of the local neighborhood association, had been fighting to have a pedestrian overpass built over the dangerous road. Within days of the elder O'Hagan's death, local residents staged a protest and city officials contacted the son about installing a traffic signal.

"I'm sure he's getting a chuckle out of that, wherever he is," Tom O'Hagan observed.

For 81 years, Walter O'Hagan had placed himself on the line, fighting for social justice and labor rights. In the process, he lost jobs, was black-balled for union activities, ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. Senate as a socialist — and earned respect from friends as well as opponents.

"You admired him even if you didn't agree with him," observed David Clayton, editorial

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page editor of the Auburn Citizen, for which Mr. O'Hagan had written a weekly column for three years. "Here was a man who inwardly was strident in his thoughts and strong in his convictions; yet to meet him he was so gentlemanly. He was the kind of guy who, when he spoke with you, forced you to ask, 'What do I think about that?'"

"He was very serious about his ideas, but never so serious about himself," noted Father Foster Rogers, pastor of Mr. O'Hagan's parish in Auburn, St. Alphonsus. "He could laugh at himself."

Walter O'Hagan was born in New York City in 1907. His family moved to Auburn in 1919. A high school drop out — Mr. O'Hagan later told one friend it was because he was bored — he read voraciously. Among his favorite reading materials were the social encyclopedias of the church, which he quoted regularly.

In 1932, Mr. O'Hagan heard socialist Norman Thomas on the radio and became a convert to socialism. Fourteen years later, Mr. O'Hagan ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. Senate as a socialist with a platform emphasizing the "need for conquering poverty and preventing the exploitation of man by man." In 1956, he was elected chairman of the New York State Socialist Party.

Paralleling Mr. O'Hagan's political activities were his efforts for the labor movement. During the 1930s, he tried to organize unions, and eventually became a secretary for the local AFL-CIO. Having driven a cab for a number of years, he worked unsuccessfully for legislation to guarantee minimum wage for cab drivers and

restaurant workers. In 1982, he was honored by Auburn labor unions for his longtime support.

Black-balled by employers because of his union activities, Mr. O'Hagan and his brother-in-law opened a soft drink distributing company. Mr. O'Hagan also bought rental property, but even as a landlord he was concerned with aiding others. He assisted tenants who had trouble with public assistance, helped them find jobs and drove them to doctor's appointments or to the store.

During the early 1960s, as the civil rights movement was getting off the ground, he rented an apartment in an all-white neighborhood to a black couple. Tom O'Hagan recalls that the neighbors were incensed, but his father said he could rent to whomever he pleased, and the black couple stayed. "Maybe it's people like him who got things to change," his son remarked.

Mr. O'Hagan married Mary Yahn in 1937. The couple attended St. Alphonsus Church until her death in November, 1987, and Mr. O'Hagan remained active in the parish until his own death. He was instrumental in creating a parish Human Development Committee — later the Social Ministry Committee — which he chaired for many years. He also helped relocate Latioian refugees, start a food pantry and launch a monthly collection to help local people pay rent or buy food.

Father Rogers pointed out that Mr. O'Hagan's socialism was very much rooted in his Christian beliefs "I sort of think underneath it all he saw the unions and the socialism as a means to carry out the Gospel," he said. He ad-

ded that even though Mr. O'Hagan urged priests to speak out on issues, he was never demanding. "I remember one time he wanted me to talk about something," the pastor said, "but he also said, 'Now Father, please remember, you're the pastor, and you have to take responsibility for whatever is said.'"

During his later years, Mr. O'Hagan became embroiled in debates through the letters columns in numerous newspapers, including the Courier-Journal. Three years ago, he went to the office of the Citizen, Auburn's newspaper, to complain that a liberal columnist had been dropped by the paper. Challenged to submit a weekly column of his own, he did, delivering each column by hand. He submitted his last column before he left for Washington.

In his memory, the Citizen has created the "Walter O'Hagan Spirit Award," which will be given on an annual basis to a guest editorialist writing on a topic of public interest. "He had the spirit to get involved in fighting, in taking a stand," Clayton said. "When we created the Walter O'Hagan Award, we were honoring his spirit."

Mass of Christian Burial for Mr. O'Hagan was concelebrated at St. Alphonsus Church by Fathers Rogers, William Spilly, Paul Brennan, Clarence Gardner and Paul Cuddy on Monday, Jan. 30. Interment was in St. Joseph Cemetery in Auburn.

Mr. O'Hagan was survived by his son; a sister, Marie McCarthy of Auburn; his sister-in-law, Gertrude Walsh; three grandchildren; and several nieces and nephews.

— Lee Strong

Father Harold Higgins at 85; former Interlaken pastor

Father Harold Higgins, O.F.M. Cap., who served as pastor of St. Francis Solanus Parish from 1961 to 1970, died on Wednesday, Feb. 1, 1989, at St. Joseph Medical Center in Yonkers. He was 85.

At the time of his death, Father Higgins — a member of the New York-New England Province of St. Mary of the Capuchin Order — was assigned to St. Claire Friary, a residence for senior Capuchin friars in Yonkers.

Born in Yonkers on Feb. 3, 1903, Father Higgins' baptismal name was Francis. Upon entering the Capuchin order on August 5, 1923, he was given the religious name Harold. He pronounced first vows as a Capuchin friar on August 6, 1924, at St. Bonaventure Friary in Detroit, and made perpetual profession of the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience on August 6, 1927, at St. Anthony Friary in Marathon, Wisc. Father Higgins was ordained a priest on June 10, 1930, in Marathon.

From 1930 to 1933, Father Higgins served at the Capuchin novitiate in Huntington, Ind., followed by a brief assignment at St. Francis Parish in Milwaukee. He returned to St. Felix Friary in Huntington to convalesce from illness until 1934.

From 1934 to 1945, he was assigned to Mary Immaculate Friary in Garrison, N.Y., where he was director of the former Third Order Villa. He served as associate pastor at Our Lady Queen of Angels Parish in New York's East Harlem from 1945 to 1949, then moved to the Indian Mission at St. Labre, Mont., where he remained until 1954.

Father Higgins lived at St. Fidelis Friary in Interlaken from 1954 until 1979, serving as pastor of St. Francis Solanus Parish from 1961 to 1970. He also served as part-time chaplain at the Veterans' Administration Hospital in Canandaigua from 1954 to 1973. During his 25 years at the Interlaken friary, he also served as guardian of the Capuchin fraternity.

In 1979, Father Higgins transferred to Mary Immaculate Friary in Garrison, where he lived

until 1988. He then moved on to the newly established senior Capuchin friars' residence in Yonkers.

Father Higgins is survived by a brother, also named Harold, of Bronxville, N.Y.

A Mass of Resurrection for Father Higgins was celebrated on Saturday, Feb. 4, at Sacred Heart Church in Yonkers, and he was buried at the Capuchin friars' cemetery at Sacred Heart Friary in Yonkers.

A memorial scholarship to assist the education and formation of future Capuchin priests and brothers has been established in Father Higgins' name. Donations may be sent to: Father Harold Higgins Memorial Scholarship Burse, 210 W. 31st St., New York, N.Y., 10001.

June Recchia, Wayne County pro-life leader, following March for Life trip to Washington

MARION - Madeline (June) Recchia, chairwoman of the Respect Life Committee at St. Anne's and St. Gregory's parishes, died on Wednesday, Jan. 25, 1989. She was 53 years old.

Mrs. Recchia collapsed Monday, Jan. 23, after suffering a massive cerebral hemorrhage on a bus ride home from Washington, D.C., where she joined seven other parishioners from the cluster — including her husband, John — for the national March for Life. She was taken to Holy Spirit Medical Center in Harrisburg, Pa., where she died two days later.

An active member of the parish, Mrs. Recchia was a member of the social ministry and folk groups in addition to the Respect Life Committee, and was also co-founder of the prayer group.

"When the news of June's deadly illness came, I was devastated," said Joan Reilly, a good friend of Mrs. Recchia. "Not only had I lost a friend, but ... the unborn had lost their friend."

"June made great strides in our local movement because of her patience, persistence and prayers," Reilly continued. "She pulled together a strong, dedicated group of men and women and we will make her efforts shine."

Dianne Reilly, 16, who also attended the march, said Mrs. Recchia will also hold a special place in her heart. "On the way (to Washington) I remember June and Lona (Breitkopf) looking up passages in the Bible, reflecting on how precious life is," she recalled. "June's tragedy united the people. All the way home, people were singing religious songs and saying prayers."

"June died doing something she strongly believed in. Maybe because of June's efforts, a few babies will be saved," she added.

In addition to her husband, Mrs. Recchia is survived by her mother, Mrs. Madeline Deil, Rochester; one daughter, Debra Recchia; sons and daughters-in-law, John and Janine Recchia of Marion, Stephen and Susan Recchia of Penfield, and Joseph; four grandchildren, Rene and Jeremy Welsher, Christina, Shana Recchia; brothers and sisters Donna (George) Stephenson, N. Chili; Elaine Deil, Rochester, Lorraine Klipp, Fred Deil, Rochester, Edward (Debra) Deil, Rochester; and many relatives and friends.

A Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated at St. Gregory's Church in Marion on Saturday, Jan. 28. Memorials may be made to Right to Life.

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