

FEATURE

'All in the Family' star talks of lessons learned

By Steve Vivona
Catholic News Service

LOS ANGELES — Carroll O'Connor bears little resemblance to the television icon he helped create. Archie Bunker was intransigent and temperamental. O'Connor exudes Irish charm with his dry wit and low-key personality.

Sitting in a Los Angeles hotel suite, he talked about his career, the legacy of "All in the Family," his deep Catholic faith and his long marriage to his wife, Nancy.

But he also discussed an issue of great importance to him — drug abuse. The O'Connors' adopted son, Hugh, a drug addict since his teenage years, committed suicide in March 1995, and since then O'Connor has been a tenacious and outspoken fighter in the war on drugs.

The addiction followed him into his adult life and into his profession of acting. He said he tried to get help, but it got the best of him. "I tried, but it got the best of me," he said in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, newspaper of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, N.Y.

O'Connor was scheduled to appear April 7 on "Personally Speaking," a weekly television interview show funded by the U.S. bishops' Catholic Communication Campaign. The show is hosted by Msgr. Jim Lisanti of the Rockville Centre Diocese and airs on the Odyssey cable network.

The O'Connors adopted Hugh in Rome in 1962 while O'Connor was shooting a film there. "We had him from the time he was six or seven days old and he became our life," said the actor.

Hugh appeared with his father on the series "In the Heat of the Night" from 1988 to 1995.

"Once a child is an addict there aren't very many things you can say" to parents by way of advice, O'Connor said. "There's only one important thing you can say. Help them fight their addiction. Help them get rid of their addiction and (be) rehabilitated."

The O'Connors convinced their son to get help in a rehab program. As soon as he was released "he was getting phone calls from his pusher ... and he was back on cocaine very quickly," the actor said.

He added that he believes an addict loses his or her capacity for love. "He doesn't know what it is. You can tell him that you love him desperately. He thanks you for it politely. Even your tears don't make the impression. They can't help themselves."

O'Connor, who is a native of New York, said his marriage of nearly 50 years to Nancy survived the loss of their child and has thrived in Hollywood, a town not known for successful unions.

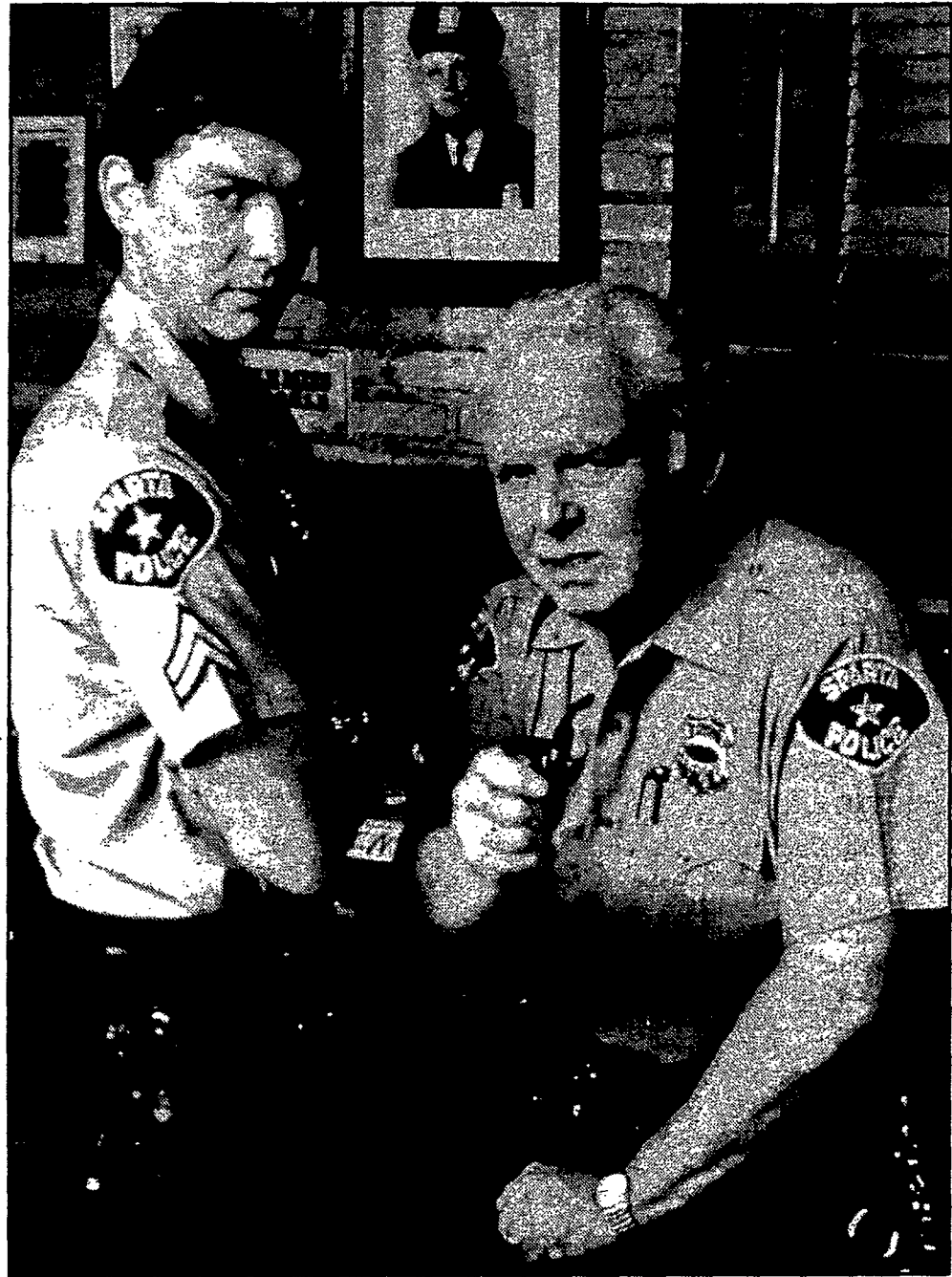
"You have to regard your marriage as the most important thing you ever will do. (In the marriage ceremony) the priest says, 'Don't take this lightly.'"

He added, "Sooner or later you've got to realize the importance of making it work and staying together, and the importance of the time you've spent together."

Faith, O'Connor said, has played an important role in his life, and has helped sustain his family through its difficulties. The O'Connors attend Mass regularly at a parish in Los Angeles.

"Religion has been very much with us, and Nancy has always been a great observer of that. Everything she's ever done, she's done with the faith in mind."

During the '60s O'Connor found success



Carroll O'Connor starred with his son Hugh on the television show, "In the Heat of the Night." A lifelong Catholic, O'Connor has become a crusader against drugs since his son's suicide in 1995.

in films such as "Lonely Are the Brave," opposite Kirk Douglas, and "Kelly's Heroes," with Clint Eastwood, before securing the role for which he will always be remembered.

"All in the Family" first aired on CBS in 1971 and generated controversy and laughter from Day One. O'Connor said the sitcom showed that satire can be done on television, but "it's not the easiest art form."

Satire, he said, is about "making fun of cherished notions, ideas and ideals. It has to be done very carefully. Otherwise it can become didactic. Audiences don't like to feel they're being taught something. They just want to be entertained."

Currently, O'Connor appears as an Irish grandfather in a new film "Return to Me"

with David Duchovny and Minnie Driver.

While he keeps a hand in acting, O'Connor's passion is the ongoing fight against drugs. He recorded a public service announcement that airs nationally; in it he simply says, "Get between your children and drugs any way you can."

He was instrumental in the passage of the Drug Dealers Civil Liability Act in California, which allows citizens to sue drug dealers for the drug-related deaths of family members.

Losing a child "is something you never get over," O'Connor said.

Despite all he went through with Hugh, "he gave me the greatest pleasure of my life for 33 years," he said. "He was everything a father could have asked for in his son."

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