

Dennis Reno, 48; youth minister

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

ROCHESTER — Just because he was a generation older than the youths he served didn't make Dennis Reno feel obliged to act his age.

"He was this 40-year-old, Hawaiian-shirt-wearing kid, with an earring," Eric Heaton said.

Other young Catholics from the Rochester Diocese recalled Mr. Reno's love for spontaneous dancing, harmonica playing and cracking jokes. Yet above all they praised his ability to care, understand and listen.

These reflections were voiced during a two-hour memorial service Feb. 9 at St. John the Evangelist Church on Humboldt Street, one of three churches where Mr. Reno had been serving as youth minister. Approximately 200 people attended the event honoring Mr. Reno, who died Feb. 6 at Strong Memorial Hospital of complications from a stroke he had suffered five days earlier. He was 48 years old.

Mr. Reno got his start in youth ministry more than 10 years ago by volunteering at his home parish, St. Mary of the Assumption in Scottsville, as well as on diocesan retreats. He eventually took part-time positions at St. Agnes in Avon and later at St. Mary of the Assumption. Mr. Reno made the leap into full-time youth ministry in 2001 as coordinator of the three Winton-Culver Planning Group parishes — St. John the Evangelist and St. Ambrose in Rochester and St. James in Irondequoit.

Among the organizers of the Feb. 9 memorial service were Alison LeChase and Tami Wollschleger, two young women from the Winton-Cul-

ver parishes who have volunteered extensively in the youth-ministry program. Both said that working with Mr. Reno has inspired them to make youth ministry a part of their future.

While serving the three parishes, Mr. Reno continued being a fixture on the diocesan youth-ministry scene, where he was affectionately known as "Big Daddy." Many who spoke at the service recalled his presence at weekend retreats, where he freely shared his life experiences and would willingly meet late into the night with any teen who was experiencing difficulties in life.

"Dennis lived to do those retreats," said close friend Theresa Fantone, youth minister at St. Margaret Mary in Irondequoit and a long-time retreat coordinator. "He was Jesus to us, he was the unconditional love."

Ironically, two diocesan retreats were held the weekend following Mr. Reno's death. Gary Bockstedt, youth minister at St. Jude in Gates, came straight to the memorial service from the retreats, where he said that "a lot of people talked about him, a lot of people shed some tears. But a lot of people smiled."

John Niziurski, a young adult who, like Heaton, knew Mr. Reno from past retreats, said he was inspired by the obvious joy Mr. Reno appeared to derive from his family and his youth ministry. "I knew that to be happy, I needed to work to be like Dennis," Niziurski said.

Mr. Reno also staffed urban youth retreats and organized cooperative efforts with Islamic youths in the



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

A prayer service for Dennis Reno, youth minister for the Winton-Culver Planning Group parishes, was held Feb. 9 at St. John the Evangelist Church on Humboldt Street in Rochester. During the service, youth-group member Emily Fields wipes away tears while laughing at a story told about Mr. Reno, who died Feb. 6.

Rochester area following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"It's been a wonderful privilege to watch Dennis come into his own in the last 10, 11 years," said Michael Theisen, diocesan director of youth ministry. Theisen added that Mr. Reno's final words were "I am a youth minister, I have been called."

Mr. Reno's funeral Mass was held Feb. 10 at St. Mary of the Assumption Church. He is survived by his wife, Kathleen; daughters Michele, Katie and Meghan; mother, Ruthe; sister, Susan (Paul) Kliment; broth-

ers Tim (Kathleen), Jamie (Mary) and John; and nieces and nephews.

Memorials may be made to Mr. Reno's family and sent to Box 22, Scottsville, NY 14546. A memorial fund also has been established to help send teens from the Winton-Culver parishes to the National Catholic Youth Conference in Houston this November. Checks should be marked "Dennis Reno Memorial" and sent to the attention of Jeannie Raisbeck at the Diocese of Rochester, 1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, NY 14624.

Catholics to lobby state leaders

More than 700 Catholics from around New York state will travel to Albany on Tuesday, March 11, to lobby state legislators on issues of concern to the New York State Catholic Conference, the public-policy arm of the state's bishops.

Known as "Public Policy Day," the annual effort highlights pending legislation and current law that the conference supports or opposes. Among the legislative aims of the conference this year are the following:

- Ending the state's "assault" on Catholic ministries' freedom of religion exemplified through a law passed last year that forces them to offer group health plans that include contraceptive and abortifacient coverage, and a proposed bill to compel Catholic hospitals to offer emergency contraception to rape victims.
- Increasing access to health insurance for the uninsured.
- Scholarships, tax credits and/or vouchers that can be used by parents at the school of their choice for their children.
- Maintaining funding, or increasing it, for services to people with HIV/AIDS; for affordable housing;

and for community-based mental health services.

- Enactment of the Unborn Victims of Violence Act which charges assailants of pregnant women with crimes against both the woman and the unborn child as separate victims.

- Reform of the Rockefeller Drug Laws that mandate "harsh" minimum sentences for nonviolent drug offenders.

- Increasing access to public transportation for rural New Yorkers.

Cardinal Edward Egan of the Archdiocese of New York will preside at a morning Mass in Empire State Plaza for policy-day attendees. Immediately after the Mass, the conference will give its Exemplary Service Award to Sister Margaret John Kelly, DC, executive director of the Vincentian Institute for Church and Society at St. John's University in Queens. The award recognizes her lifetime of service to the church in New York state and to the conference.

Information on the conference's legislative agenda can be found at www.nyscatholic.org.

— Rob Cullivan



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