
Deacon

"God's Gift to People"

by Bob Harvey

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JOHN O'BRIEN was heart-transplant patient No. 185 at the Ottawa Heart Institute. When he died on February 28, 1997, at the age of 58, he was also a Roman Catholic deacon, an ex-RCMP member and president of the heart-transplant patients association. (*See Obituaries, "RCMP Quarterly", Summer 1997*)

But what he was particularly remembered for at his funeral was his work as a chaplain at the Heart Institute, especially after his own transplant in 1994. Rev. O'Brien began working with patients at the institute and the Civic Hospital after his ordination in 1990 as a permanent deacon, and continued there after recovering from his heart transplant. He suffered another heart attack last fall but was scheduled to return to the Institute as a chaplain.

"He was God's gift to the people," said André Séguin, transplant patient No. 137, and the liaison between the institute and the 256 patients who have received transplants there.

"He helped patients talk about their fears, and they knew this wasn't someone who had just read it out of a book."

He said patients also found it easier to talk to Mr. O'Brien because he "Wasn't just a clergyman. He was an ex-RCMP member and he knew what life was all about."

In a taped interview in a TV program broadcasted in the fall on Vision TV, Mr. O'Brien said he regarded his survival from his first heart attack as a miracle, because his kidneys had stopped working and his blood pressure had almost disappeared before family members and others started praying for him. When his kidneys started functioning again and his blood pressure rose, he was put on the Jarvik artificial heart machine until a transplant became

available. He was one of only seven patients to use the Jarvik at the institute. He died of complications from the transplant.

In the interview, Mr. O'Brien said God allowed him to live so he might give other transplant patients hope that they too, might survive. Since the transplant, he said in the interview, he had become more thankful for the little things in life. "You're thankful you wake up every day. You take each and every day as a bonus, a day that God has given you."

About 600 people attended his funeral at St. Augustine's Parish. Among them was Bill Reggler, who worked with Mr. O'Brien in the RCMP. He told mourners that in the late 70s and 80s, Mr. O'Brien headed the process of computerizing the RCMP's paper records of fingerprints and other information on criminals, and put together a system that has been copied by other police forces.

As a permanent deacon, Mr. O'Brien received no salary from the church, but he served not only at the Heart Institute but also in many capacities at St. Augustine's and elsewhere. He performed marriages and baptisms, preached homilies and also served as administrator of the parish during recent study leaves by the parish's pastor, Rev. Vincent Pareira.

Mr. O'Brien was born in Miramichi City, New Brunswick, and was educated in Halifax and Montréal before joining the RCMP in 1960. He served in Niagara Falls, Toronto, Edmonton and Winnipeg before moving to Ottawa in 1973, to work with the Identification Section there. He retired from the RCMP in 1988 as a staff sergeant. He was survived by his wife, Helen, son John and daughter Barbara O'Brien-Litten, three grandchildren, and his sister Mary Shel-drake, all of Ottawa. 
