



William McFarlane '83

Interviewed and Written by Patrick Mc Gavin 8/10

WILLIAM MC FARLANE '83

Losing your father at any time is difficult. It is beyond the pale to imagine the emotional experiences of William (Bill) McFarlane when his father Ronald, a retired Chicago police



lieutenant, died from complications of a heart attack in June 1982, after Bill just completed his junior year of high school.

His life suddenly marked by a tremendous void, Bill McFarlane took immediate solace in the supportive network from Leo that tried diligently and thoroughly to somehow compensate for the loss.

“Leo made it easier,” Bill said during a recent interview.

“I’ll never forget pulling up in the limousine for the family and standing right out front of the church was about ten or fifteen of my classmates and Bob Foster took over as the man of my life, helping me and giving me advice. In a lot of ways he stepped in and he became a father figure to me my last year at Leo. Brother Shannon was the principal back then. You never get away from Leo. I don’t think there’s anywhere in the country you can go where there’s not anybody from Leo.”

Vibrant, short though barrel chested and naturally friendly, Bill combines an ease with a directness of purpose. You expect that, one supposes, from a “man of the cloth,” but the man now known colloquially and to his parishioners as Father Bill has held that mantle of respect and authority for a relatively short time, some five years. His story is both unorthodox and fuller than many, filled with curves and change of pace excitement that is a story all its own.

His tale contains multitudes and it conveys the unpredictable arc of a life that is still blooming and moving inexorably forward.

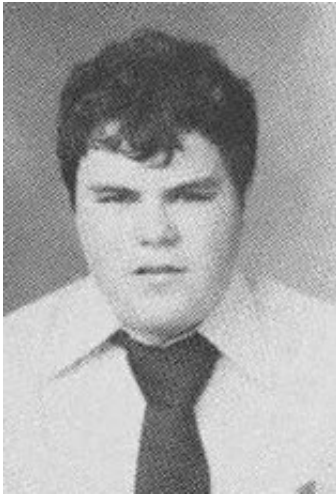
Origins

“Both of my parents were born in Chicago. I grew up in the neighborhood called Canaryville, in the parish of Saint Gabriel, at 45th and Lowe. I had three brothers and three sisters. I’m the youngest.



“Ronald was my father’s name. My mother Joanne was a secretary for the court reporters at 26th [and California]. My oldest sister is fifty-five and I’m forty-four, so my parents had the [seven kids] over a period of about eleven years. Both [parents] grew up in Saint Gabriel. My dad was baptized, confirmed, married and buried out of Saint Gabriel. My dad went to Tilden.

“It was an Irish Catholic community. Growing up in Canaryville, we didn’t really go out of the neighborhood that much. We knew everybody in the neighborhood, and everybody knew who I was. Five of my closest friends had fathers who were either in the Chicago police department or the Cook County sheriffs department. These five closest friends all lived on the same block. It was great; we were a tight knit close community. Canaryville gets confused with it, but it’s definitely not Bridgeport. Saint Gabriel is the only Catholic Church in the neighborhood. It’s kind of landlocked. Halsted bordered it on one side and Back in the Yards. The other side was the railroad tracks. We had viaducts were there were boundaries all the way around. Whenever I tell people I’m from Canaryville, people’s response is: ‘Tough neighborhood.’ I look back at it, and it was more like Mayberry RFD to me.”



Bill was born in 1965, a pivotal moment. Even as the South Side and the larger world was transformed by the social tumult, Civil Rights, and significantly, a country seemingly at war with itself, Bill admittedly lived in a quieter, more secure place, an island of tranquility. As the child of a police officer, his perspective offers a fascinating contrast to the rage and anger of natural public consciousness.

“A lot of the stuff that was happening in sixty-eight, I don’t really have memories of it. My parents kept us protected. My dad was out there in it. I do remember a story from childhood of my dad called the house and my mom put mattresses on the front of the windows. That’s just a story I remember. My dad was at the International Amphitheater [during the student riots surrounding the Democratic National Convention]. At the time he was probably just a regular police officer, but he was out there.

“Canaryville was like living in a bubble. It was great, or I should say, it was both good and bad. I didn’t know a lot about the outside world at the time. We were sheltered. We went from Canaryville every summer to Delavan, Wisconsin, for about two weeks every year and that was our vacation. We didn’t do a lot of traveling to other places around the United States. Whenever we did travel it was always by car.



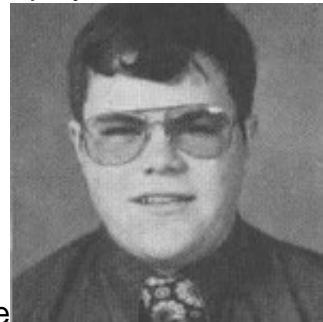
“If I went to Loop it was with my grandmother. She worked downtown for a department that doesn’t exist anymore, gun registration. I’d go and visit my mother at 26th and California, where the different court reporters would take me to the courtrooms. I’d sit right next to the judge during the time, in the witness stand, because half of the time they’re not using the witness stand. These weren’t big trials going on. I’d go in and sit next to the judge and watch the proceedings going on in the courtroom.

“Also, the dad of my one friend, he ran the security for the courts. He was the chief. I’d also go down there and see him and I’d be treated like a king by all of the sheriff’s department people. Twenty-Sixth Street to me was not a daunting experience. I’d walk in with mom, and back then, it’d seemed that everybody knew each other, whether you were a sheriff or a secretary. To me that was a big memory as a kid going down there.”

Decision-making

He did what most young kids did, and he felt free and relaxed growing up.

“I played baseball and football, but I wasn’t really very good at any of them, or I didn’t really know what I was doing out there. If I did get in, I’d be on the line, of course, and one of my best friends would have to tell me where I’d have to go for that play. I was more of a benchwarmer



in football. In baseball, I played more frequently. Those were the two major sports for us down there; there was no soccer. Some played basketball, but I’m five-foot three and basketball was never in my future.

“When it came to a choice for high schools, most of the boys went to De La Salle, some went to St. Rita, which was on 63rd at the time. My parents told me I couldn’t go to De La Salle and I couldn’t go to St. Rita, where all of my friends were going. My choices were St. Ignatius or Leo. My next oldest brother, Michael, was at Leo. He was going into his senior year.

“When I went to take the entrance exams, it was during the famous winter storms [of 1979]. We took the test that day. They had to make arrangements to get us back home. Jay Stranding drove the Canaryville guys back home. He dropped us off at one of the viaducts because he realized he wouldn’t be able to get back out if he went under the viaduct. We walked back in the neighborhood. I think that was my first time ever at the school. I must have shadowed with my brother there once or twice, I suppose. But the first day I went to Leo as a student, I had to ask the bus driver if that was the school. We stopped at 79th, and I asked if that was Leo, and he said, “You’re going to a school you don’t even know where it’s at.”

I said, “Yeah.” He said, “That’s it.”



“My two oldest brothers went to St. Ignatius. My brother right above me went to Leo. My mom didn’t really like St. Rita at the time because my uncle—her brother—had gone there. My brother [Michael] just didn’t like school. It didn’t matter where he went. A funny story about my first day at Leo, I’m walking past the doorway and I hear: ‘McFarlane.’ I backed up, until I was in the doorway, and it was one of the [football] coaches, Dave Mutter. He grabbed me by the shirt and said: ‘Are you anything like your brother?’ I looked at him and said, ‘Absolutely not.’ That kind of shocked him. He let me go and he said something like, ‘Good for you.’ My brother had a reputation by the time I got to Leo. During my time at Leo, my brother would stop me in the hallway and say, ‘We’re going to the beach. Do you wanna go?’ With his buddies, he would just disappear. I was always afraid to do something like that with my parents.

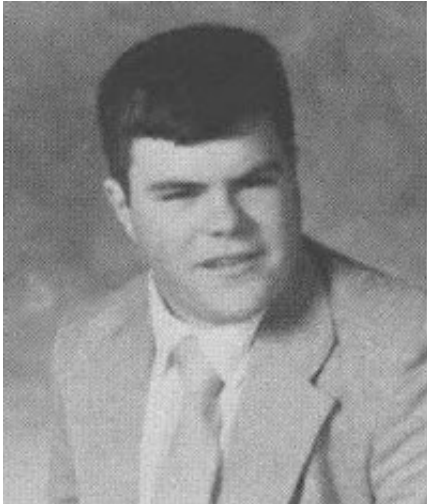
“I took the Halsted bus when I first started at Leo, and then we had a bus service that started to pick us up. It was close to my house, I had to walk down like five houses to the corner.”

Revelation

“Leo was the first time I dealt with black people. I had no problem. I went to school with some of the greatest guys. This happened to me at Leo and I always tell eighth graders the same story. Before they go away to high school, I will go visit the eighth grade class and tell them: On that first day, when they ask, who wants to be the class representative for student council. Everybody was afraid to raise a hand, and so I rose my hand. Because of that, I was the class representative. I was president of my class my sophomore, junior and senior year.”

He shifted his own athletic ambition into a different realm. The interesting development was how it only accentuated his own clout and cache at the school. Just as important, it enabled him to belong to a special community within the school that marked him with a role and purpose that he was resolved to perform to his highest ability.

“I was the manager and trainer of the football team, and that gave me a certain status because like most schools, the football players are the kings of the school. I was the one who was taking care of them on and off the field. I took care of the jocks. I didn’t close myself off to make new friends at Leo. During the fall, my life belonged to football. The manager had to be at every practice and every game, just like the players. We’d go after the games and have a good time, especially after a win, of which there weren’t too many but we did pretty good. That became my life. It was always bittersweet after the football season [ended].



“When I was at Leo, the Brothers were very good. Brother [R.J.] Lasik taught me how to type, and I’m grateful for that to this day. There was no cheating when he was teaching you. You couldn’t look at the keyboards. To this day I do a great job of typing, and it was all because of him. This surprises people but we had several women teachers. One [named Lorna Bradley] taught art and she was gorgeous. She was probably in her late twenties or early thirties, and all the guys were gaga over her. All of a sudden, there was a renewed interest in art at Leo [laughing].

“Mrs. [Judith] Ponticell taught in the English department. You didn’t get her until the fourth year, so you heard about her for two or three years. The first day, senior English, you’re scared out of your wits because you finally have her. She had her name [written on the board] and twenty-two letters after her name. She said: ‘Those twenty-two letters represent the different degrees I’ve gotten over the years in English. I didn’t go to school to get those twenty-two letters to put up with any crap from you.’

“Then she passed out these contracts and she’d say sign these and take them home and have your parents sign them. Of course, we were all shocked. Everybody came back the next day and she asked whether everybody had their contracts. She saw they were all in, and her [demeanor] completely changed. The first day she established she was in control of the classroom and in control of the curriculum and she was not going to play around and she was one of my best teachers.

“I had a paper route down in the neighborhood, delivering a special Back of the Yards journals and I did that on Wednesday afternoons and it gave me a couple of bucks. Not that we had a lot of money, but I had what I needed, for clothes and that sort of thing. At that point my buddies and I were still too young to really go out and have a need to spend money. We got to junior year and one of my buddies got his driver’s license and after that, we were gone but up until then, I didn’t have to work.

Life altering moment

“My dad died at 54. He retired and died soon thereafter, which is not an uncommon story for police officers.” As a young boy, Bill had experienced his own profound epiphany that jiggered his own moral awakening. It was to haunt him much of his young adulthood, a sense of his



calling.

“I was sort of [drawn to religion]. I knew I was going to be a priest when I was twelve or so, when I was in seventh grade. I heard mass and one day it just became crystal clear to me I should be a priest. I ignored it for twenty years. I didn’t even start looking into it until I was thirty-two.

“The Brothers sent one of my favorites from Leo to recruit me to become a Brother when I was a senior at Leo. I went home and had a conversation with my mother about it. I told her if I was called, I was called to be a priest and not a Brother. I knew that. I still ignored that. In some ways, I’m glad I did ignore it and I had some life experiences before becoming a priest. In other ways, I think I would have been better off if I just went right in. The experiences I had between Leo and going into the seminary are good experiences and all come with me into my priesthood.”

Bill graduated from Leo in the spring of 1983. He was a young man on a mission. As if to acknowledge the importance of his father, he decided to follow in his footsteps. Life threw him a curve.

“I wanted to be a Chicago police officer like my dad. I took mostly criminal justice courses in school. I took the Chicago [police entrance] test, but I just never got called for it. I went to Aurora College with one of the other football managers. I got into security then. I was, as a freshman, head of security. It wasn’t a good fit for me as far as colleges went. I went to Lewis for a year, and then I did Daley College and Washington College, if I was working downtown. I kind of just quit.

“I was drifting, working in different fields. I worked security for a place called SPI Security. I had a bit of a thing going on with films. I worked Backdraft, Only the Lonely, Home Alone when they were shot in Chicago. I was security on all of those films. Then I went with Garcia Security, they had the contract with Soldier Field. I was always a big Bears’ fan, but I couldn’t really afford to go to the games. Then I got the job there, but two weeks later, I was named a supervisor, and I never got really to see the games.

“It was not until I made the decision in life to become a priest that finally I had direction. The police stuff was starting to fade away because I was getting older and I knew it was not



going to be a reality. Some of that stuff drifted away from me. Every company I ever worked with, I worked my way up to supervisor. At Garcia’s, it took two weeks to become a supervisor.”



He could not rid himself the notion that he was meant to be a priest. The funny thing was, the process or necessary steps remained something of a mystery. "Nobody told me what the next step up and I was probably too scared to ask. I remember the day I decided I was finally going to take the next step to become a priest, and my hand was shaking while I was calling the archdiocese. Nobody ever talked to me about it and said, 'Go to college and take philosophy.' It never was really pushed.

"It was not until years later when I said I wanted to be a priest that I had to go back and get my degree. I ended up getting my degree out of Governors State. Out of all of the schools I went to, they took ninety credit hours and I was able to go in and do thirty credit hours."

In the fall of 1999, his life direction appeared settled. Mr. McFarlane entered the Mundelein Seminary. Whether he still held some personal doubts, he was jolted by a new possibility. "In ninety-four, I took the test to become a Chicago police dispatcher. I went into the seminary in ninety-nine, never having heard anything from the city of Chicago. I was in the seminary for about a quarter. I got a call from Chicago and I thought I didn't want to leave anything behind, I didn't want to have any regrets, so I left the seminary and they offered me a job as a call taker.

"I got the job in September of ninety-nine and it was about ten months later, a feeling came over me of what did I just do. I worked at the 911 Center at 1411 W. Monroe. At Thanksgiving break, I left for the call center. It was interesting. When you work the 911 Center, you know what's going on in the whole city at all times. When I worked the call center, I received an award for having some of the most consistent call days. I remember on June 8, 2000, I answered in one-day more than three hundred and eight calls.

"It was a very difficult job. There was one woman who worked near me who was as tough as nails. I turned around one night and she was crying. I received a call earlier, some parents were worried that their son was suicidal. We sent the police and they left it, talked with him and the parents. The next day the parents went to the grocery store and had come home and he was in the garage dead.

"She'd gotten the call and when I saw she was crying, I realized something big was going on. When I listened to the tape of her call, it dawned on me it was the call I'd gotten from the same people the day before. You don't forget those things. I was thinking at the time of going back to the seminary, and I turned around and saw her crying and I said, I don't want to do this for the rest of my life.

"It's as if one day I just woke up and realized what I just did, I looked around and said I did not want to do that the rest of my life. I loved the job, I was really good at the work, but I knew that's not what I was called to do. I called the seminary and they had a meeting with me. I always remember this, I had a meeting with them on May 18th and I received the re-acceptance letter May 20. It was almost as if they sent the letter before I had the meeting with them.

Destiny

The doubts were permanently eradicated. He knew he was meant to be a priest at twelve, and it



took him some twenty years to find the strength and courage to take the next step. "I was much calmer on the return. I didn't have anything on the outside pulling at me anymore. I was able to concentrate on what I was doing, and I was more certain than ever that I was supposed to be a priest. There was no internal argument going on anymore. [The time away] just clarified things for me. When I went to the seminary I got a masters in divinity. It's a beautiful campus.

"At Leo, the Brothers talked to me about being a Brother but nobody ever talked to me about being a priest. I stepped away from it. I don't know that I was ever reluctant about it, but I always had in the back of my head I was going to be a priest and I just wasn't interested in doing it yet. I waited until the time was right. My life has really taken a turn. I love being a priest. It's an amazing thing when you're there for the good times, with people, and you're there with the bad times for people. With some families, I've had both. I've been there to baptize a baby and I've been there to bury a baby. It's always a privilege in either time to be with a family and to be a part of it and help out.

He understands and accepts the personal sacrifices, but what he receives in return is incalculable. Father Bill is just five years on his new job, and every day is worth holding onto.

"On your first assignment, you tell them what you're looking for, whether you want white, black, Hispanic, poor, rich, city, suburban, and they give you the total opposite [laughing]. I wanted to be back in the city because something in the back of my mind always told me to go back and start the ministry at 911 Call Center. The fire department has a chaplain, the police department has a chaplain, and I always thought the call center is a ministry, of sorts.

"I said I wanted to go to the city, South Side and go back to my roots. They originally tried to assign to me Saint John the Evangelist in [northwest suburban] Streamwood. I went out there and I knew I wasn't going to be happy. Then they assigned me to Saint George in Tinley Park, which is closer to what I wanted, but it was still suburbia. I was there for a year, and then I went to Saint Catherine of Alexandria in Oak Lawn for four years.



Father Bill is officially being installed as pastor at Saint Ann in Lansing, in southeast suburbs on the edge of the Indiana border, August 22. "It will be a weird kind of thing because I'll have friends from Leo showing up, I'll have my childhood friends here and I'll have Rita friends here. It all comes together." "The idea is to get used to being a priest. Coming here, it was baptism by fire. You work your way through it and figure things as you go. There's not a training program on how to be a pastor. There's nothing quite like just doing it. I have a very good parish as far as I'm concerned. They're can at times be loneliness. Who do you talk to about some of the things you have to deal with? You get a call to go to the hospital, and it's a young man or woman, and it's hard to internalize some of those things and deal with yourself,



seeing this family go through this situation. You have your classmates. I have a couple of close friends I'm able to call and talk with them. We have spiritual directors you can go talk to. You fall heavily on your classmates and priest friends to talk with."

The first time he said mass, he recalls, being very "nervous, because obviously a big crowd there, family and friends watching me the last five years ago who goes away to school and is transformed into this priest character they're not used to. I was surrounded through by friends who guided me through my first mass. I was probably more nervous my second time when I was by myself.

"Now, you practically have the whole mass memorized. The first time, I read every word out of that book and my friends were pointing me in the book of where to go next. They were very good to me. I was back home at Saint Gabriel. Even in the seminary, I went back and helped the current pastor during Easter. You still never forget what a privilege it is to say Mass.

Coming home

The time Father Bill spent at Leo crystallized his ideas and interests, but it also pointed him toward the path he would take. It was a rocky terrain though a never dull or uninteresting time. His faith was no doubt shaken. He found his *métier*, and he proved his value, to himself and to those he now serves.

"Leo was for me a very healthy place. I never had to be woken up to go to school. I loved getting up and going to school. It was, for me, a fabulous experience, one of the best of my life. They taught you how to be a man. Bob Foster helped me when my father died. Fred Shannon was a very good principal. Even being a manager for the football team, dealing with winning and losing, you understood that you weren't always going to be on top. Bob Foster always taught us after games that we lost that you're learning life lessons. We learned how to be hard working.

"The [Latin] motto of the school, *Facto non verba*, or deeds not words, that's in my head as a priest. Don't just talk about it, do it. That's helped me in my priesthood. It's helped me be a better priest. I'm not a priest who's afraid to get my hands dirty. I'm part of the community, part of the life. I think a lot of that came from Leo. When my dad died, Leo was there for me, and my classmates were there for me. The teachers were definitely there for me.

"When we got together for our class twenty-fifth anniversary a couple of years ago it was like going back in time. Now, with [the Internet social service network] Facebook, I'm making a lot of connections or remaking friendships from back then. Leo gave me what I believe to be are the tools I need to get through life."