



Tomas Bissonnette

November 20, 1939 - August 10, 2022

Thomas William (Tomás Guillermo) Bissonnette, a big and generous man who throughout his life found joy in serving others, died August 10th at his home in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood surrounded by loved ones. He was 82 years old. He was preceded in death by his wife, Rita Simó, founder of The People's Music School based in Uptown.

Bissonnette was born in Detroit to Ethel Huchthausen and Harvey Bissonnette. He attended Catholic schools, and loved music, sports, reading and learning languages. After Seminary training, he was ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of Detroit in 1965. His understanding of his faith, and his church, was influenced by an early mentor with whom he worked, Msgr. Clement Kern, known as the "labor priest," and by the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960s, which affirmed a view of the church as a worldwide community, with a commitment to justice and compassion — ideals he held throughout his life.

"He was always very dedicated to the poor," recalls his sister Carol White, "I remember he was assigned to an affluent parish and he was unhappy, he wanted to be in downtown Detroit where the poor people were. That's part of what attracted him to Rita — she felt the same way."

Bissonnette and another priest were the first priests to train Hispanic men in the US to serve as Catholic deacons, preparing them to assist parish priests in their pastoral duties. He was asked to join a South Bend-based team working with Hispanics within the larger Midwest region, and soon after to

assume the position of the Director of the Hispanic Institute at Mundelein College in Chicago. Through his work he met Simó, a native of the Dominican Republic. Having obtained dispensation from his priestly vows, he and Simó married in 1978.

They settled in Uptown, a community with a significant low-income population and a wide variety of ethnicities. In Uptown, “he got to meet and help refugees and immigrants from places like Chile, Vietnam, Uganda, Central America, Eastern Europe, and Africa — all people whom Tomás and Rita loved and respected,” recalls his friend Joel Benavides. Their house on Beacon Street became a center of community, “filled with activity, laughter and music. Local friends and out-of-town guests came and went, and many of them have special memories of their visits,” according to a 2014 biography of Simó. While supporting Simó’s work at the music school, Bissonnette launched Spanish Speaking Bookstore Distributions, building on his earlier church-based efforts to serve Hispanic communities. “His main focus was to provide religious books for parishes, religious institutions, bookstores, students and lay people all over the United States and some Latin American countries,” recalls Benavides, who worked with him at the bookstore. But his lifelong love of learning took him much further: “Tomás ended up with a huge catalog of books ranging from novenas to the most sophisticated academic books in literature or theological studies.”

At the same time, Bissonnette continued his social activism. “Tomás was always going in different directions trying to devote his life to the service of others,” says Benavides. From his early support of César Chávez’s United Farmworkers Union, to his involvement with the Uptown and Edgewater community organization O.N.E., to his last months when he was working with the Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly (LBFE) delivering food bags, and serving with his parish Refugee & Immigration Ministry, Bissonnette remained dedicated to helping others and building community.

Throughout his life he retained his indefatigable spirit. “I remember trying to teach him to water ski,” recalls his cousin Will Anthis. “He never could get up

on the skis, but he kept trying.” He also was a model train enthusiast: one train, in the Uptown apartment where he and Simó lived in later years, he filled with figurines depicting places they had visited during their long and colorful lives. And this past Christmas, he installed a larger model, the Polar Express, in the building lobby, recalls longtime neighbor Pamela Young, to the delight of neighborhood children.

Besides his sister, Bissonnette is survived by his niece Laura White and her sons Aydan and Alex Ryan, as well as many others he considered family by adoption, including Luis Perez, Yolanda, Diana, Evelyn, Elizabeth, and Miriam Arellano, Bruce Bwambale and Rimir De Leon.

Funeral Mass will be celebrated by his longtime friend, Rev. Joe Mulligan, SJ at St. Gertrude’s Church in Edgewater at 7 pm on Wednesday, August 17th, preceded by viewing at 6 pm. The Mass will also celebrate the life of Rita Simó, who died in September 2020 at the height of the pandemic; Bissonnette was planning a memorial service for her at the time of his death.

Previous Events

Visitation in Church

AUG 17. 6:00 PM - 7:00 PM (CT)

St Gertrude Catholic Church
1420 W Granville Ave
Chicago, IL 60660
(773) 764-3621

Funeral Mass

AUG 17. 7:00 PM (CT)

St Gertrude Catholic Church
1420 W Granville Ave
Chicago, IL 60660
(773) 764-3621

Tribute Wall



“ *Tomas Bissonnette*

October 08, 2023 at 11:31 AM



“ *Tomas was a neighbor of ours in same building. He and his wife were always very welcoming and my son did some learning at her school. People like this are hard to find and should be cherished. They loved each other what the word love truly means.*

Diane Peck - August 02, 2023 at 02:36 PM

FG

“ Tomás met Rita Simo in 1976, the same year she founded The People's Music School within a few days of the School's first student recital in December. Their life together was always linked to the People's Music School, its growth, and its impact. Tomás was a presence always. Even after Rita's passing in 2020, he visited the school's Uptown Academy regularly, sharing stories and working his way into the hearts of staff, board, and faculty.

My wife Christy and I had the distinct pleasure of attending what I believe was Tomás' last Chicago Symphony Orchestra concert with him. We picked him up at his apartment, and enjoyed priceless conversation in the car and all the way into Orchestra Hall. We talked about music, the CSO, Rita, People's, composers, Chicago, his personal history, world politics, literature and more. Then we devoured the superb concert like a feast, and resumed the rich conversation all the way home. As we dropped him off, we were visiting with him in front of his building, his eyes welled with tears as he opened his heart to let us know how much he loved the evening, and how he appreciated the time we had spent with him. "I'm so very happy," he said with an embrace as his voice broke. I will never forget that precious evening.

Rest in peace, dear gentleman.

--Frank Graffeo

Francis Graffeo - August 16, 2022 at 03:06 PM

TF

“ The Freedom Road Foundation purchased the Strength & Solace Spray for the family of Tomas Bissonnette.



The Freedom Road Foundation - August 15, 2022 at 07:54 PM