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Chicago activist who fought for political, social reform dies

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John Hill, who battled for political and social reform in Chicago for some 35 years, died June 16.

Ordained in 1950 as a Chicago priest, he worked closely with Msgr. John Egan, eventually heading his own organization, the Alliance to End Repression. From the 1960s through the 1970s and beyond, the alliance continually challenged Mayor Richard J. Daley, the Chicago Police Department and the Cook County court system, exposing fraud, racism and incompetence. Hill left the active priesthood in 1973 but continued his ministry as before, often working hand-in-hand with Protestant and other social activists.

He later moved to Michigan, worked at Notre Dame University for the Center for Law and the Handicapped and later in South Bend, Ind., with foundations and organizations seeking to improve housing opportunities for the poor. In declining health in recent years, John is survived by his wife and son.

The tribute below was written by Judi Heikes, a longtime friend and co-worker of John Hill.

A Memory of John Hill

By Judi Heikes

John "Jack" Hill was an organizer. If I said no more, he'd be only half described. More than another half of John would remain to speak of in order to have any sense of who he really was.

John was a politician. Had he not been given to a (then) higher calling, he would have been any opposition's worst nightmare.

He was a policy wonk; a reader, a writer, an actor; a tireless activist. And he loved poetry.

I first met him when my cousin, Jan Geiger, came to Chicago to find a teaching job. Jan met John through a network of religious men and women emerging from the shelter of convents and parishes, who wanted to live more fully in the world and in life. Jan stayed with The Eugene McArdles for a while, getting over a broken heart, but eventually found more than a heart full in Tom Honore. I got to see the whole thing happen. John Hill was their best man.

Jan also saw her cousin, that would be me, college educated, with five children under 8, living in a scramble of a house, and succumbing to an atrophied intellect. "Come to this meeting with John Hill," she said, "The organization is called The Alliance to End Repression. They are doing some good things."

"The Alliance to End what?"

I went, and as they say, I stayed, eventually leading The Cook County Special Bail Project, whose purpose was to keep the accused out of jail before trial through the use of I ? Bonds or affordable bail. John had worked with the League of Women Voters, who as court watchers, determined that bail hearings were conducted in less than

30 seconds, with no legal representation for the defendant, no establishment of background, no family contacted or in attendance. John helped develop a model program in which volunteers ? legal and lay - saw to giving balance and fairness to defendants, even at this early stage of the judicial process. The Cook County Special Bail Project lasted seven years, was federally funded; had 75 (unpaid) lawyers and over 250 volunteers who became the citizens face in the Cook County Court system. It was cited as an exemplary project by the Illinois Law Enforcement Commission.

The CCSBP was only one aspect of The Alliance to End Repression. It was a hydra of projects that challenged the tight fist of Mayor Richard J. Daley, the Chicago Police Department and the court system's rule in the city.

John, a "son" of Msgr. Jack Egan, shared passion for justice with Methodists, Baptists, Jews, non-believers, the sane, the smart and the way-out-there crazy. Never was there such an energetic collaboration to push against power gone awry. John was appointed by Msgr. Hillenbrand as chaplain for the Young Christian Workers. In these endeavors, he did far more than preach about social justice; he "walked the walk." He was joined in the early days by Rev. Jack Mendelsohn, a savvy, stately Methodist minister, Dick Criley, stalwart head of The Committee to Defend the Bill of Rights, pastors and ministers of every stripe, and a woman, who became his right hand, Betty Plank from Friendship House.

I don't know if I could say that John was filled with righteous anger about the courts, the jails, police brutality, even evicting the poor from their homes, although I suppose he was. Jack was not an emotive man. What you could see in him though was a keen awareness, a determination, and almost a delight in confronting all of the oppressive powers because he knew what was right and couldn't look away from what was wrong. He once said that the reason he got white upper and middle class people to understand the plight of the poor in the justice system was that a few of them got arrested, and jailed, for protesting the Vietnam War. "They shared cells with the great unwashed," he said, "and they saw it from the inside looking out for a change."

Among some of the early things John and the alliance did was to flush out the citizen's board that had been established with duties and responsibilities for oversight of the Chicago Police Department, its policies, budgets, and activities, and professional conduct. Attending one of its "open" meetings, Jack sat in a small room with one reporter and the board itself, while reports were being read into a virtual emptiness. A few meetings later, it was moved into a very large room because it was packed with those "invited" to attend by John Hill.

Jack joined the efforts of a young Japanese man, Hiroshi Kano seeking to remove the internment law, applied to the Japanese during World War II, still on the books in the State of Illinois. They were successful.

John was so human. As the alliance got some minor notoriety for being an irritant to the establishment, there was a newspaper story about The Alliance and John. It described him as having an "owlish" look. John would never have claimed himself to be a handsome man, but "owlish" did get a bemused reaction. "Hmm, owlish," he said.

The offices of the alliance were in a rat-infested building, cheek and jowl with the "L", over a Pixley and Ehlers Restaurant, and under a ballet studio. Thump, thump, screech, screech was background music to planning for justice. At meetings in the main room, Jack would just pause the discussion until all the percussion had its say, and then continue, remarking that "this particular office space is quite 'affordable.'"

His leadership style was trust with oversight. When it was time to hire staff, and we were finding the pickin's rather slim, given the salary and the work, Jack asked if we had any black applicants. "You serve an almost totally black constituency. If you haven't had black applicants, then, you aren't looking in the right places." He was correct. Of four staff we hired, two were black, smart, loyal, dedicated.

It's not good to be an organizer and not a strategist. After a few years of going at it, John and Betty Plank

decided to give grades to the city on the police department and justice system, and then hold a press conference on their report. The press coverage was only mildly satisfactory, but what happened next was "le coup de grace."

Early on, Jack told a group of us that it wouldn't be long before the alliance would have its very own spy. In fact, it was not long at all. John counseled, "You'll look around the table, and you'll just know that somebody shouldn't be there." All our meetings were open, of course, but the police, the FBI, the city were more than interested in the activities of this amalgamated group. And that's when The Cook County Special Bail Project got "Dave." John called a few of us into his office one evening, and said, "You've got a spy. Don't do anything about it. If you exposed him, he'll just be replaced. And this way, we can use him to track who he reports to." Sure enough, Dave attended every meeting, was on time, was reliable. In fact, he was with us so long that he was likely going to be nominated for some office on the board. That's when I put my two cents in. "It's one thing for Dave to get a pay check." I said, "I just don't want him to get a raise or a bonus." Dave reported in to some authority by pay phone after every bail project meeting, and it could be said that he added a certain cache to the things that we were about.

As part of the "grading caper," John and Betty Plank had studied the financial statements of the City of Chicago, and the Chicago Police Department. In doing so, they discovered an account number that appeared on both balance sheets. That's when the lights went on. The city was funding the spies. John and Betty had uncovered The Red Squad.

The Red Squad and the role of the alliance in bringing suit against the City of Chicago for violating rights of assembly and free speech, among others, is a story in itself. But, I take supreme pleasure in recounting the fact that that year John Hill and Mary Powers of the Citizens Alert program attended the graduation ceremonies for cadets of the Chicago Police Department and one cadet in particular: our Dave. As Dave walked down the aisle from receiving his diploma, John and Mary leaned out, shook his hand and said, "Congratulations!" The look in return was inestimable. Dave did not return to meetings of the Bail Project after graduation.. We heard he was assigned to the vice squad, for which, in our imagination, he was totally unsuited. We had been a piece of cake.

In the 1970s John left the active priesthood, married, and the two raised a son. Eventually, he left the alliance, and the family moved to Cassapolis, Mich., where John went to work writing grant proposals that helped the poor remain in their homes. He was a lector at his parish; took long walks while reciting poetry, and was always up for playing "the old man" in the community theater.

It would be too much of a cliché to say that John Hill was one of a kind. He was a brilliant man. He was a good man. An interested man. An invested man. A just man. No need to light a lantern to look for him. Jack was there ? with us ? all the time; there for all to know - and see.

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