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'Fierce advocate' for the disabled Dick Bell dies

Robert McClory | Jun. 27, 2013 NCR Today

"With him, it was ministry, always ministry," said Margaret Bell of her husband, Richard "Dick" Bell, who died in March. "He treated every client as special."

Bell's passing went unmarked in the media except for a very brief death notice in the *Chicago Tribune*. But he was fondly remembered for his work with the developmentally disabled.

"Who knows how many thousands he helped?" said Dan Hecht, who met Bell some 20 years ago when Bell was the executive director of Service Incorporated of Will Grundy and Kankakee Counties, an agency of the Illinois Department of Health, serving a large area southwest of Chicago.

Bell was not your typical executive, Hecht said. "He was so outgoing, enthusiastic and generous with his time. I've never met anyone like him. For him, service was a cause."

It was through Bell that Hecht got the right kind of placement for his own disabled son. And Hecht became a volunteer for Bell's agency and later for Bell's personal creation, Advocates United, which organizes citizens to pressure the Illinois legislature for better service for the disabled.

But despite their long association and friendship, Hecht was unaware that Bell was a former priest until after his death. "He never mentioned the subject," said Hecht, "but I knew he was a very serious believer. He often offered to pray for people and asked for their prayers."

In fact, Bell was extremely active at his parish in Oak Park, a Chicago suburb. He was a cantor at Mass, sang in two parish choirs and served for a time as chair of the parish council.

Bell was ordained for the Chicago archdiocese in 1963 and resigned in 1968. He married Margaret, a former Glenmary sister, and had what Margaret called "43 very good years." In 1970, the couple adopted a daughter, Mae, from Korea, who, with her husband, Will Campbell, now have three children.

Longtime friend Owen "Oz" McAteer described Bell's fierce determination with Advocates United: "His style was to get family members and other volunteers together to get the resources needed for the disabled. Every other year, he and his team would sponsor a legislative seminar day where the representatives and senators from Springfield would be lobbied to come up with state help for the disabled and their families. And they came. He never called it a ministry in public, though as he and his wife knew that's what it was."

At home, said McAteer, "Dick was an expert gardener. Each year in about February, he would plant seedlings and put them in the windowsill pots before planting in the ground in the spring. His garden was spectacular. Last summer, in about the 10th year of his bout with prostate cancer, he told me that he asked for one more year of garden, and he certainly got it."

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