

The Wagnerian



*Rev. Lyle Guttu
1936-2007*

Stunned campus mourns Wagner College chaplain

Rev. Lyle Guttu dies after being struck by an SUV in West Brighton

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Editor's note: The following article appeared on the front page of the Staten Island Advance on Tuesday, Dec. 18, 2007.

The longtime chaplain of Wagner College, a Renaissance man whose skills as a counselor, educator and ambassador reached well beyond the Grymes Hill campus, died Sunday night of injuries sustained when he was struck by a sport utility vehicle while running errands in West Brighton a day earlier.

The Rev. Lyle R. Guttu, 71, was crossing Bement Avenue Saturday at around 2:40 p.m., near the parking lot of JPMorgan Chase bank, when he was hit by a 2006 Nissan Pathfinder driven by 47-year-old Theresa Tortorella of West Brighton. Ms. Tortorella had just turned left from Forest Avenue onto Bement, according to the police report, and said she did not see Rev. Guttu in the road until it was too late.

The chaplain was conscious when medics arrived, and complained of pain all over his body.

In the police report, Rev. Guttu told investigators he was in the crosswalk at the time of the impact. In the same report, the driver told police Rev. Guttu had not been in the crosswalk.

Ms. Tortorella was driving within the 30-mph speed limit and was not under the influence of drugs or alcohol, police said. There were no tickets issued at the scene.

Rev. Guttu was taken by ambulance to Richmond University Medical Center, West Brighton.

An autopsy by the office of the city medical examiner determined Rev. Guttu's death was caused by the "multiple blunt impact injuries of the torso" sustained when he was hit by the SUV.

A CAMPUS MOURNS

News of Rev. Guttu's death pierced the Wagner campus yesterday, turning a previously scheduled holiday luncheon for administrators, faculty and staff into an occasion of mourning and remembering.

"All of us have a hole in our hearts," Wagner's president, Dr. Richard Guarasci, summarized before introducing the Rev. Richard Michael, pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Stapleton, who had visited Rev. Guttu in the intensive care unit on Sunday afternoon and prayed with him.

"Lyle was my friend, my brother in Christ, my colleague," Rev. Michael said. "Lord, now was not his time. It was too soon. Forgive my anger and disappointment."

At a table filled with faculty members, Patricia Tooker, assistant professor of nursing, said she noticed



Rev. Richard Michael, Pastor Trinity Church and Dr. Walter Kaelber, professor of religious studies, listen as Wagner College President Dr. Richard Guarasci speaks on Dec. 17 about the college's longtime chaplain Lyle Guttu.

Rev. Guttu, an avid fan of Wagner's basketball team, was missing from the game against Maryland Eastern Shore Saturday night. "But I saw the lights on in his house," she said, recalling her confusion.

Home for Rev. Guttu for the last 35 years had been a cozy cottage on Wagner's campus, a few hundred yards across Sutter Oval from the Spiro Sports Center.

"He helped me through so many times of grief," said Dr. Marilyn Kiss, professor of foreign languages. "Now he's not here to help me through this one."

MIDWESTERN NATIVE

Lyle Robert Guttu was born on April 16, 1936, in Red Lake Falls, Minn., to Mathias Guttu, a Norwegian immigrant, and Clara Guttu. The youngest of five children, he was raised in the nearby farm community of Thief River Falls and graduated from Lincoln High School before winning admission to Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass. — "mostly on the strength of my ability to play hockey," he would later clarify with his characteristic Midwestern sense of humor. "I hardly knew Latin was a language."

At Harvard, he "first survived and then mildly excelled," graduating in 1958 with a bachelor of arts degree in history. On Harvard's hockey team, he became the fourth-highest career scorer — a record that stood until just a few years ago.

Rev. Guttu maintained a close connection to Harvard throughout his life, keeping in touch with classmates, and serving as class secretary and admissions recruiter. In the past few months, he had been planning the 50th anniversary reunion of his class.

After Harvard, he taught English briefly at the Nichols School, a college preparatory day school in Buffalo, before answering a call to the Lutheran ministry. In 1965, he received a master of divinity degree from the Union Theological Seminary on Manhattan's Upper West Side, and was ordained on July 21 of that year in St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Queens.

Rev. Guttu's first assignment as a clergyman was as pastor of the Church of the Holy Redeemer in Brooklyn. He ministered there for seven years before he was appointed Wagner College chaplain in 1972.

He was chaplain through six presidencies, and held a variety of administrative positions that included dean of students, special assistant to the academic vice president, vice provost and, his most recent title, special assistant to the president. He served as master of ceremonies at commencement and other college functions.

He also accepted an occasional faculty assignment, and had just finished teaching an Introduction to Bible class in the fall semester.

WEEKEND SOIREEES

Gregarious, charming and a passionate debater, Rev. Guttu often turned his campus home into a gathering place for friends and colleagues — many of whom would not normally travel in the same social circles.

"People of different opinions always felt free to talk" in his presence, said Dr. Walter Kaelber, professor of religious studies. "His house was a safe haven. He was trusted by all factions; people on all sides had affection for him."

Rev. Guttu enjoyed hosting Friday

night soirees in his comfortable living room, where it would not be unusual to find a mathematics professor debating the issues of the day with a football coach.

"He could argue on any subject and loved to take the opposite view," said Dr. Otto Raths, professor of physics and a frequent Friday night guest, acknowledging Rev. Guttu's intellectual prowess. Topics ranged from politics to cosmology and the existence of God. "Sometimes we'd debate questions that have no answers," Dr. Raths said.

As guests sipped wine and snacked on peanuts and pretzels, the chaplain would consult an almanac he kept next to his chair if a debate got out of hand.

Rev. Guttu had a knack for reaching out and staying in touch, Dr. Raths said, with letters and phone calls. "He remembered everyone" he encountered in his life.

Jane and Dr. Romaine Gardner of Grymes Hill, former faculty members at Wagner, enjoyed a close friendship with Rev. Guttu and dinner dates that alternated between his house and theirs. Rev. Guttu was scheduled to dine at the Gardners' home on Saturday, the day of the accident. The Gardners visited Rev. Guttu in the hospital.

"It will be hard to think of life without him. He was a permanent fixture in our weekly calendar," he said.

COUNSELOR AND FRIEND

Dr. Norman R. Smith, president emeritus of the college, described Rev. Guttu as "the conscience of Wagner."

"Every community has one moral leader who, like Lyle, is often its

chaplain. When I assumed the presidency 20 years ago, Lyle was already the 'go to' person within the college. Faculty, staff and students all sought him out for counsel and friendship. Lyle's accessibility was 24/7 and the door to his house was always open — literally. It was not uncommon and didn't feel inappropriate to just walk in," Smith continued. "That was the way Lyle liked it."

"Lyle was a man of extraordinary intelligence, integrity and compassion," said Robert Scamardella, an attorney who teaches business law at Wagner. "He always exhibited the best of human nature. I've lost a good friend."

"Lyle was a man of faith," said the Rev. William J. Preuss II, president and CEO of Eger Lutheran Homes and Services, Egbertville, where Rev. Guttu served on the board of trustees and presidential search committee. "This faith guided him in all he did, whether it was working to provide care for the aging and persons with special-care needs, interacting with the students and faculty at Wagner or in his role as a parish pastor in Brooklyn."

ACTIVIST AND GARDENER

Rev. Guttu enjoyed writing, and was a contributor to the "Religiously Speaking" column in the Advance, Wagner's alumni magazine and numerous theological publications.

He was a member of the Wagner College Circle of Omicron Delta Kappa National Leadership Honor Society, and a sub-committee chairman of the Harvard Club Schools Committee. Former memberships included the executive board of the Metropolitan Youth Synod, Lutheran Church in America; the Council for a Better East New York; the Urban League; Lutheran Ministries in Higher Education, and Planned Parenthood of New York City.

He enjoyed cultivating the gardens around his campus home, growing rhubarb, tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, zucchini, beans and the occasional pumpkin. His son and daughter, Mathias J. Guttu and Allison A.D. Guttu, said he planned frequent trips to Manhattan for off-Broadway shows.

Friends and colleagues recalled his adeptness in the kitchen.

"We are absolutely stunned by his death," his children said last night. "We loved him, and know that he loved us very much, too."

In addition to his son and daughter, Rev. Guttu is survived by his former wife, June Guttu Liman; two sisters, Carol Guttu and Mavis Pfeiffer, and two brothers, Elmer and George.

Claire M. Regan is a professor of journalism at Wagner College. She also serves as the faculty advisor to the Wagnerian.



Remembering the man... the life of Lyle Guttu

Chaplain Lyle Guttu
1936-2007

April 16, 1936- Rev. Guttu is born to Mathias and Clara Guttu of Red Lake Falls, Minnesota.

Spring, 1954- Rev. Guttu graduates from Lincoln High School located in Thief River Falls, Minn. where he was a standout athlete on the LHS hockey team.

Spring 1958- Rev. Guttu graduates from Harvard University with an A.B. in History. He also continued his hockey career at Harvard, being chosen for the All-Ivy team twice consecutively.

1958-1960- Rev. Guttu spends time teaching English and coaching the varsity hockey team at the Nichols school, located in Buffalo, New York.

1960-1965- Rev. Guttu enrolls at Union Theological Seminary, working five years to earn a B.D. with his major being the Sociology of Religion. After becoming ordained, he becomes a board missionary to the Church of the Holy Redeemer in Brooklyn.

January, 1968- Rev. Guttu is declared as pastor at Church of the Holy Redeemer, a position he would hold until 1971.

1972- Rev. Guttu is appointed as chaplain at Wagner College, taking over the position from the Rev. William T. Heil Jr. It is a position that Lyle would serve proudly for the rest of his life.

August, 1974- Rev. Guttu marries June Allison White

1975- Rev. Guttu begins his first tenure as dean of students, one that would last until 1985.

1976- Rev. Guttu and his wife have a daughter, naming her Allison. The family moves from what is now known as the Kairos House into what is now known as the Chaplain's Residence.

1979- Outside of his duties as chaplain, Rev. Guttu accepts a position as pastor at St. Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church in the neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn. He would serve that pastoral post for the remainder of his life.

1981- Rev. Guttu and his wife have a son, whom they name Mathias.

1985- Rev. Guttu is named special assistant to the academic vice president, he held the job for three years.

1990- Rev. Guttu again becomes the dean of students, fulfilling the role for two more years.

1992- Rev. Guttu is named vice provost, a job he held until the year 2000.

2000- Rev. Guttu becomes the special assistant to the president, a post that he maintained until his passing.

Dec. 15, 2007- Rev. Guttu is struck by a vehicle on Forest Avenue during an afternoon shopping outing.

Dec. 16, 2007 9:15 p.m.- Rev. Guttu dies in Richmond University Medical Center.

Information compiled from Lyle's obituary printed in the Staten Island Advance on Dec. 18, and the In Memoriam: Chaplain Lyle Guttu webpage accessible from Wagner's homepage.

Students share memories...

From friendly conversations in passing, to guidance in times of tragedy, students share their fondest memories of the late Reverend Lyle Guttu.



"He was always a friendly face that you could talk to at any time. He was a very religious man who was passionate about Wagner and the students. There was never a quick conversation with Lyle. He enjoyed talking with people and had a respect for everyone's opinions. I particularly remember that when Hillel would meet in the Kairos House, he would personally remove the Christian iconography for us, that's how much he cared about making people comfortable."

-David Norman, Junior, vice-president of Hillel

"When I think of Lyle Guttu, I first think of how when I graduate this May he will not be there to give a blessing over my class as we step into the "real" world. That in itself makes me sad and was one of the first things I thought of when I heard the news. He was and forever will be a Wagner staple. It is sad to think that he won't be seen on campus anymore and even worse that he won't be there when someone needs that extra guidance that they just can't seem to find anywhere else.

The second thing I thought of was how he impacted my life specifically. This brought me back to the week following the aftermath of April 16, 2007, the Virginia Tech shootings. That week I needed a bit of guidance. Though I didn't go looking for any in him, he is

where I found it. He had a memorial in the campus' chapel for the victims. I was asked to attend the memorial and say something about Caitlin, a friend of mine who was killed. As I sat there and listened to Rev. Guttu speak he made me feel ok: ok that I lost a friend, ok to be mad at who had done this, ok that I was human. Most importantly he made me feel like it all had happened for a reason. I didn't feel sad that I lost a friend, I felt better that I had people to turn to in this time where the world didn't make an ounce of sense and that made everything a bit more clear. For that I will always be grateful to Rev. Guttu. Sobbing, Rev. Guttu asked me stand in a very crowded chapel and tell everyone the thoughts that I had been thinking and the sorrow I had in my heart. It was nice to see so many of Wagner's staff and faculty there to offer help and mourn along with the rest of America and me. That is one thing that always spoke to me, no matter how much life at Wagner can get to us, we are a family. Wagner and especially Rev. Guttu helped remind me that every life has meaning. No matter how much one thinks they are not important, that just by smiling at someone or being someone's friend you have already made a change in someone.

I was sad to hear of Rev Guttu's passing, but I rest assure that he will never be forgotten and that his message and compassion will live on through me and the many others he helped."

-Yvonne Rodriguez, Senior



"Lyle was such an active force at Wagner and will be truly missed. Even though he was involved in so many aspects of this campus, he always had the time to stop and check in on how everyone was doing. One of my fondest memories of Lyle was at the September 11th Memorial Service, where he not only spoke eloquently about his own experience that day, but took the time to pull me aside and thank me for what I had shared. I always appreciated his effort to make me feel a welcomed part of this community, as I know he made everyone that came in contact with him feel."

-Morgan Scott, Senior, SGA president

"I was passing out nametags at an evening Wagner function to various members of the faculty and staff, politely asking, "Name, please" of the people I didn't recognize. A group of staff members I knew quite well walked in just before an older gentleman whose face I didn't know. I asked his name, and before he could respond, the other staff member shouted at me, "You don't know Lyle Guttu? He's only the nicest man you'll ever meet!" I promptly introduced myself, only to engage in rapt conversation with this kindhearted and hilarious man, much to the annoyance of people still waiting to receive their badges. I finally found the nametag,

enchanted to have made acquaintance with the charming older fellow."

-Seneca Smith, Junior



How do you properly remember a man?
 How does one even attempt to turn a person's essence into an adequate reflection?
 Perhaps we can't.
 But we try.

We try as a means to make us feel comfortable in a reality that can suddenly seem so cold and unwelcoming.
 It's people like Lyle Guttu that make us want to try,
 that make us wish we could bottle up the memory of a person and delve into it anytime we'd like.

For Lyle Guttu, a man who brightened the entire Wagner College community...

We reflect.



Rev. Lyle Guttu
 1936-2007



A day after Rev. Guttu's death, the American flag flies at half mast in the crisp winter air near the Union.



Academic Advisor Margaret Echanique (left) tears up during a staff luncheon on Dec. 17 that doubled as a memorial. President Richard Guarasci (right) speaks emotionally.



Camille Cook (left) listens to remarks about the chaplain during the luncheon in the dining hall. Margaret Echanique and Dr. Marilyn Kiss (right) comfort each other.