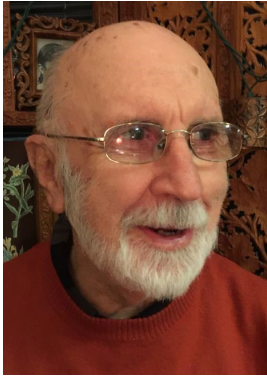


David Folkes, Retired Priest and Counselor, Remains an Advocate

by Bob Shamo



Park Tower is a diverse community, with all sorts of interesting people owning, renting, and working here. That said, I do believe we have only one retired Australian priest!

David Folkes grew up in Sydney, Australia, the only child in a warm and caring family and with the good fortune to live, he says, “smack in-between a parochial school 100 yards to the left and a church/monastery 100 yards to the right.” After secondary school, David entered seminary to become a priest in the same Passionist order he had grown up knowing. Passionists lead a semi-monastic life but periodically go out into surrounding parishes to preach. David memorized ten sermons for those occasions and serve as resources for local families.

After seminary, David and two friends developed a youth leadership program, and David was its chaplain/counselor. This was in the 1960’s, when world events had sparked a strong sense of questioning and civic consciousness among youth.

The program was so successful that many wanted to join, but David felt under-prepared for that amount of responsibility. He’d identified a course of study at Chicago’s Loyola University designed specifically for priests and religious leaders from around the world. So in 1972 he made his way to Chicago for a two-year graduate program in counseling psychology. On weekends he preached at local parishes to support himself, and in the summer of his second year he actually taught the program himself.

During his time at Loyola, David made a lot of friends, among them a young woman named Mary, a graduate nursing student. Their deepening relationship required him to examine his moral commitment to celibacy. When they decided to marry at the

conclusion of their Loyola studies, David submitted his resignation from the priesthood.

He now found himself in Chicago with a new wife and no job. But David did have a superb education and a wealth of experience. So he sent out 70 resumés and received back two replies, one saying, “no, thanks,” the other inviting him to interview for a job as an addiction counselor. The interview itself was a bust -- David’s master’s program had included no information about addiction -- but it did pique his curiosity about this dawn-ing specialty.

His first opportunity came at Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge. He started as an intern and then for six years was part of a treatment team, half of whom were themselves recovering from addiction. He reflects, “I got to learn from team members and from our patients that there are many pathways to addiction -- family background, friends, life circumstances -- and that pain is often a precipitator for people seeking help.”

David has since had a number of teaching and counseling experiences in hospitals, schools, prisons, and family centers. The clientele can be surprising. For example, an addiction program he developed at Highland Park Hospital treated a large number of the well-to-do, including doctors and lawyers.


In the corporate world, David worked for a time in the employee assistance department of Kemper Insurance Corporation. In its heyday, Kemper employed 18,000 people but over time shrank to about 9,000. Towards the end, David says, “My team’s arrival at an office in, say, California or Texas, signaled a round of layoffs, with counseling about to be offered to the unfortunate employees.”

As addiction treatment became better understood, Illinois established a Certification Board. David was among the first to receive certification and later served for six years on its volunteer board of directors.

David returned to Australia in 2009. He and Mary had raised two children, but over the years they had grown distant and eventually divorced. Back home now, he intended to retire but instead was persuaded by an old friend to live for awhile in the outback region of Australia where he tutored aboriginal children in English and math. He found it spiritually an enriching experience -- the eagerness of the children, the stark beauty of the land and the culture. Another friend drew him into a program in Darwin, where he visited refugees who were being held in Australian detention camps.

Other short-term pursuits followed, but David began to think about returning to the United States, mainly to stay in touch with his two grown children and a grandchild living in Evanston. He did indeed return in 2012 and became re-acquainted with his family.

Of the many friends David had known in Chicago, one he considered special: Pam Woll, a long-time resident here at Park Tower. Pam is a writer, and addiction is a subject she writes about regularly. She and David had run into one another frequently at conferences, and upon his return they began the relationship that has now brought him to live with her at Park Tower.

Though retired professionally, David stays busy with civic involvement around refugees and immigrants. He has pulled together a group of twelve churches and synagogues sponsoring refugee families, meeting monthly to share resources. He also visits with immigrant children who arrived in this country unaccompanied and are currently in detention at a facility in Rogers Park. And, as you might expect, he loves and identifies with the many other immigrant families who make Park Tower their home. 

To learn more of David’s current interests, email him at emu1935@aol.com

*Bob chairs the Newsletter Committee and edits **TowerTalk**.*