

MAKING HISTORY TODAY

KEVIN

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This column and the work of the Presbyterian Historical Society of the Southwest normally try to draw attention to significant persons, places, congregations, and institutions that either reflect or contribute to the Reformed tradition and heritage in this part of God's kingdom. There are many, many stories that need to be told of such contributions. But today I want to tell a story about someone who will not appear in any history book for having great theological insights or for having done anything of great importance, and yet, as a part of the Church of Jesus Christ, he made a significant impact on my life.

I first saw Kevin Smith at a Mo-Ranch Men's Conference in the late 1990s. He came with several members of his church, First Presbyterian Church in Pasadena, Texas, a group that came with some regularity. The men from the church I served usually sat behind his contingent whenever there was a plenary session in the auditorium. We had no idea that 10-15 years later our paths would cross again when I became the pastor of his church in Pasadena.

Kevin was mentally handicapped. By the time I first saw him at Mo-Ranch, Kevin was pretty much integrated into the life of the church. It had not always been that way. He had a rough life. Having been abused by his father, then watching his parents divorce, and later discovering that his older brother had died of a drug overdose, Kevin had gotten into trouble with the law. Thanks to one of my predecessors, Rev. George

Kluber, Kevin was released from jail. Kevin became devoted to this compassionate pastor.

Then, there are the people of the congregation who surrounded Kevin with love and direction. One, in particular, Dick Fifield, became Kevin's guardian and carefully oversaw Kevin's financial situation. The Fifield family not only befriended Kevin but they considered him part of their family. The men of the church took him to the Mo-Ranch Men's Conference. Other members provided transportation to and from Sunday worship and other church activities, one of whom, Ruth Askine, was particularly supportive.

Kevin was able to work. For 18 years he worked at Wyatt's Cafeteria. He also worked at HEB grocery store. Often he would go to the mall and offer his services wherever needed. He seemed to make friends wherever he went.

When I arrived on the scene, Kevin and I remembered each other from Mo-Ranch. We would go out to lunch periodically. In worship he would sit on the very front row, usually by himself. At certain services he wanted to sit with me in the chancel. When he did so, I suspected he simply wanted to be seen as an integral part of the church. Occasionally, when I suggested that he might want to preach, he would let out a huge laugh.

Sometimes he would ask me what my favorite season was. Before I could answer, he would let me know that his was Christmas. How he loved the Christmas Eve Candlelight Communion service! His favorite "song" was the "Hallelujah Chorus" from Handel's *Messiah*. When this piece was sung at the conclusion of the Easter morning worship service, all who wanted to do so were invited to join the choir in the loft to sing

it. Kevin would join me and others as we joined that magnificent chorus. Kevin couldn't carry a tune in a bucket, but that didn't seem to matter to him or to anyone else.

Kevin died of cancer on October 12 of this year at the age of 67 years. In his final years he lived with Maria Villarreal and her family. He was considered a member of that family too.

Over the years Kevin had lots of families, most of which made a positive contribution to his life. The church was one of those. He loved the church and was an important part of the life of that congregation.

One of the purposes of the Presbyterian Historical Society of the Southwest is to remind us all that the church is filled with unsung, and perhaps unnoticed, contributors to our life together. No doubt, there are examples like Kevin in your congregation. In this season perhaps we should be especially mindful of such persons, for Jesus, the head of the church, said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (John 13:12). Kevin helped me understand that a little better.