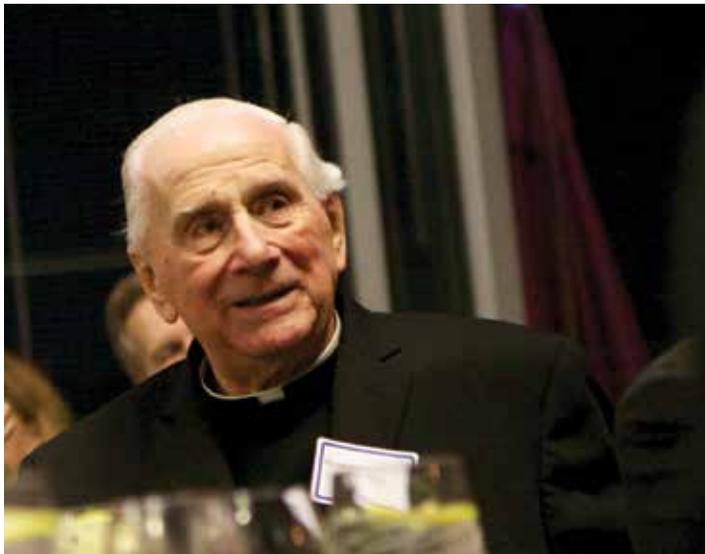


Moffitt Cancer Center Remembers

Monsignor Higgins

By Michelle Bearden



AN ICON. A LEGEND.
A STREET SAINT. A TAMPA TREASURE.
MONSIGNOR LAURENCE HIGGINS WAS
ALL THAT AND SO MUCH MORE.

Born in Magherafelt, Northern Ireland, he seemed destined to be a star athlete, leading the County Derry Gaelic Football Team to the Irish National Championship in 1947.

But the call to serve God was even stronger. After ordination, the Irish priest was sent to America to win new souls for God. He planted roots in Tampa in 1958, making this his adopted home until he died of heart failure on Aug. 24, 2016. He was just shy of his 88th birthday.

What he accomplished in that span of time made a wide-ranging and positive impact on his adopted city.

Higgins founded St. Lawrence Catholic Church on a 20-acre cow pasture off Himes and Hillsborough avenues. Reputed for his quick wit and to-the-point sermons, he grew that parish from a few dozen congregants to more than 2,200 families, and helped start three more churches.

When he retired in 2007 after 49 years of service, he was the longest-serving priest in the Diocese of St. Petersburg.

But his reach extended far beyond his congregation family. Higgins was also a visible community leader; a savvy civic activist who used his connections with the rich and powerful to help the poor and needy.

One of his beneficiaries was Moffitt Cancer Center.

In 1994, Ted Couch, then chair of the cancer center Board of Directors, asked his friend to join the group.

“We were a new and growing institution at the time, and we knew he was a great resource,” Couch says. “He could relate to anyone. It didn’t matter if you were Catholic, atheist, Jewish, Baptist or whatever.”

Couch had long observed Higgins’ “uncanny ability” to get people engaged and involved by using his charm, intelligence and kindness.

“It was his secret weapon,” Couch says. “It was hard to turn him down.”

Higgins served on the Moffitt Board through 2012. Even after he left, he made his services available whenever he was asked.

“That’s the kind of person he was,” says Couch, who still sits on the institute Board and now chairs the board of M2Gen[®], Moffitt’s wholly owned for-profit research subsidiary. “He knew so many people in Tampa and could make his case with such passion. And his endorsement of Moffitt’s mission in the community was invaluable. Having him on our team was a big plus.”

Higgins made an indelible mark on the Tampa Bay area through the tens of thousands of lives he touched personally and indirectly. Moffitt Momentum honors this revered spiritual leader with recollections from members of our extended family.

“MONSIGNOR WAS AN ICON IN THIS COMMUNITY AND IN FLORIDA. HIS SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP AS WELL AS HIS ADVICE AND COUNSEL WILL BE MISSED. HE WAS A VALUED FRIEND TO ME AND TO THE CANCER CENTER.”

H. Lee Moffitt, founder of Moffitt Cancer Center

“Monsignor was a spiritual pillar for over half a century and had a profound influence on so many of us as individuals and as leaders. At Moffitt Cancer Center, he is remembered and cherished as a very special member of our family, serving on our Institute Board of Directors for more than 18 years.

Monsignor brought his passion and love for people to everything he touched, including his service at Moffitt. We are forever grateful for the many years he spent with us in helping to guide our institution.”

*Dr. Alan List, president
and chief executive officer, Moffitt Cancer Center*

“He was exactly how you hoped a priest would be. Accessible, humorous, loving, kind, generous in spirit. A true reflection of Christ.

When you first saw him, you felt like you made his day. He was always so glad to see you. He made you feel special. The joy just spilled over the conversation.

He never took himself seriously. But he took his causes seriously. Monsignor always wanted better for those who were hurting.

He would want us to carry on his legacy. Take care of each other, reach out to others and be sensitive to the indigent, to the mentally ill, to alcoholics, to people living on the edge. Let them know they are not forgotten and that they are loved.”

Celia Ferman, director, Ferman Automotive Group, Tampa Bay Lightning Community Hero, Meals on Wheels volunteer and supporter, and Moffitt Institute Board of Directors member

“Monsignor dedicated his life to serving others, particularly those who were hurting and in crisis. During his nearly 20 years as a board member, he made sure we didn’t forget that reducing human suffering is why we are here. Monsignor also made sure we didn’t lose sight of the disproportionate impact cancer has on the most vulnerable in our community, the poor and elderly. Monsignor was our moral compass and the moral compass for the community.”

*David de la Parte, executive vice president/
General Counsel, Moffitt Cancer Center*



On behalf of Moffitt’s Institute Board of Directors, Robert Rothman (right) honors Monsignor Laurence Higgins at the group’s 2013 annual meeting. Higgins had served more than 18 years on the Board.

“He was a true disciple of God. If you pick up the Bible and read it passage by passage, you can see how Monsignor Higgins led his life. He was the real thing.

He never turned anyone down for help or advice. And he did it in a way you could understand.

He made me laugh, all the time. I’ve never met anyone like him in my life. The void he’s left will be impossible to fill. I love him dearly.

He’s going to live on forever in my heart and soul. I think we could serve his memory best by taking those lessons he taught us and applying them in our lives.”

Former Tampa Mayor Dick Greco, who served on the Moffitt Foundation Board from July 1996 to June 2012. He was Higgins’ tennis partner, dinner companion and traveling partner for many years.

“His heart was so big for all people, especially those who were less fortunate. Because the Tampa Bay community had such incredible respect for Monsignor, if he believed in your cause or organization, people in the community knew it was worthwhile.”

Tampa philanthropist Susan Sykes, who served with Higgins on the board of the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay. She and her husband, John Sykes, are Moffitt supporters.

“He was a strong, tough man with the softest heart. And the most unique, most religious and most humane person I’ve ever met. Nobody knows the countless number of people he helped over his long lifetime. He did it quietly, without seeking attention. Tampa is the luckiest city in the United States to have had someone like him.

It didn’t matter who you were. Monsignor always made you feel like somebody special. He had a way of bringing you closer to God. It was his gift. And now he is in heaven, where he belongs. We just got him on loan here on earth.”

Former San Francisco Giants owner and shopping mall developer Edward DeBartolo, Jr., who serves on the Institute Board of Directors

“Monsignor had such longevity in this community. He could relate to generations of families. He had a history with them. He knew the kids, their parents, their grandparents. That’s so rare these days.

But his flock was more than Catholics. He spread his wings over the entire community. I looked at him as an ambassador of religion. He was an example of the good and the positive.

What I will always remember is that he didn’t sit back and wait for things to happen. He took action. He was willing to take

that first step to get the ball rolling. That’s why he was such a good leader.”

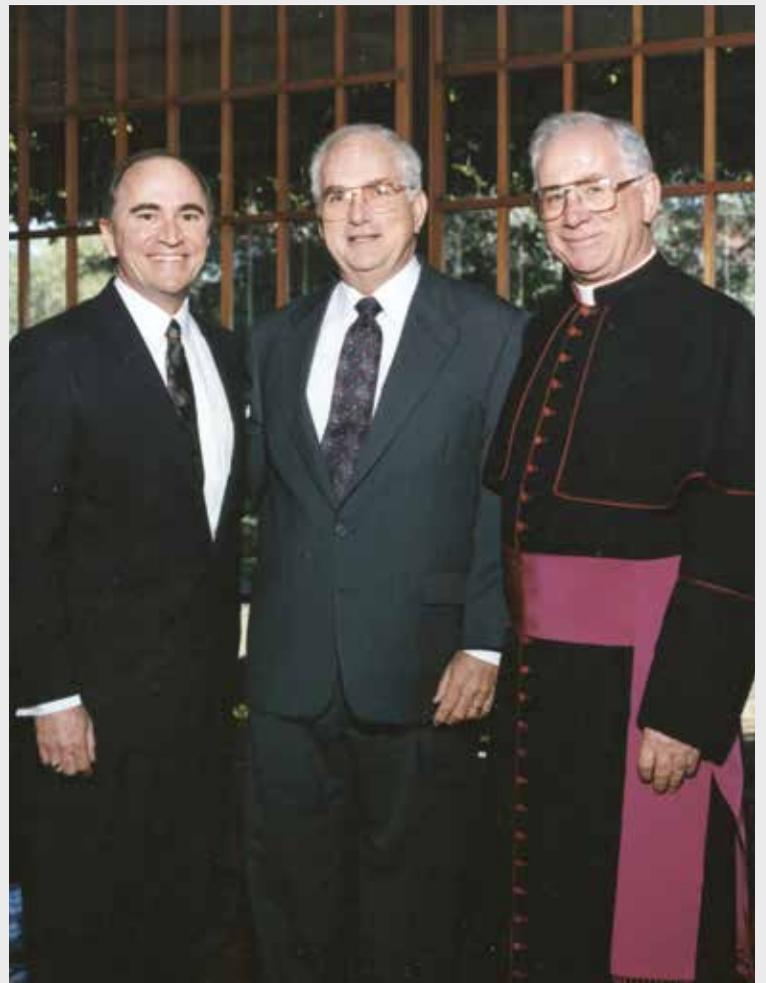
Former Tampa mayor and Florida Gov. Bob Martinez, on the Moffitt Board of Advisors. He was a eulogist at the funeral.

“A very mischievous saint. You could just tell by that Irish twinkle in his eyes. He was able to provide spiritual care to all because he was everyman’s man.

He came here when Tampa was so young. And as this city grew, his arms just got wider. He showed us all what it meant to be a true Christian.

Thank you, Monsignor, for all that you gave us. You won’t be forgotten.”

Valerie Storms, Moffitt’s manager of Chaplaincy Care



L-R: H. Lee Moffitt, Ted Couch, Monsignor Laurence Higgins