

Extraordinary lives

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [March 15, 2000](#) issue

The last time I wrote about scanning the obituaries, I referred to people whose accomplishments were widely recognized. This time I will look at the lives of the less known, to illustrate ordinary goodness in an often ungood world. I hope the papers in your town do what the *Chicago Tribune* does: interview friends and family members to bring some color to each account.

One day in mid-February I noticed that Lillian A. Brummel, 79, of Aurora was remembered with a mass at Annunciation Church, where she had been a member for 50 years. She joined the Altar and Rosary Sodality at what her daughter characterized as “a real close parish” so she could help neighbors get through difficult times. She cooked meals for bereaved families and served food to those gathered after burials. “She always gave more than her share,” but she didn’t neglect home, being “more than there for us,” said her daughter. How ordinary was this farm wife. Yet also how extraordinary.

Up the river in South Barrington a memorial was held at Willow Creek Community Church. Ruth A. Cunningham, 84, had volunteered for Gray Ladies and spent years serving at veterans hospitals and helping mentally disabled women. Then she helped raise funds to found a hospital. A daughter tells about this provincial: “She literally had friends all over the world. She never hesitated to open her heart and her home to someone in need.”

I like the story of Infant Jesus of Prague parishioner Dr. Humberto Velasco, whose widow said that “whatever his hospital needed, he did. They could always count on him.” I find her next remark healing: “He was not a casual dresser. He used to say that if you are going to be a physician you have to be a proper one. He said you don’t go to work in your play clothes.”

The one cleric on that day’s page, Edicott Ivy Sr., 71, ministered and gardened in North Lawndale, one of Chicago’s most troubled communities. In 1968 he received new life through a kidney transplant, and gave life in return through many projects and to many souls. While taking daily antirejection drugs, and thus being constantly

reminded of the brevity and fragility of life, he went to work founding Greater Mount Calvary Missionary Baptist Church. What about his health? "Oh, I'm taken care of, don't you worry about that," he said. He transformed six trash-piled lots into public gardens.

Ivy's first church was burned in the riots of 1968, so he refurbished a paint factory and turned it into an urban cathedral. When he preached, "it was like churchgoers had seen the light." What these four preach to me is the importance of community. They neither died nor lived alone.

Before I get pious or weepy let me mention the mass at Alexander Church in Palos Heights for service station owner and semi-pro balladeer Robert Preston Woollet, 84. Doris Slouber, his pianist these last eight years, said he would "do" your car while singing bouncy songs like "Walking My Baby Back Home." He "was said never to have had a short conversation in his life." He kept singing right up to the moment they wheeled him into the emergency room. People heard him warble "It's a Most Unusual Day." And so it was.