

Jesuit Volunteers to fete one of its founders

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Jesuit Father Jack Morris reminds people that just living is a sacred delight.

“We have to listen to that voice that spoke over the head of Jesus in the Jordan, ‘You are my beloved. On you my favor rests.’ That echoes to us, too,” says the priest, pastor of St. Mary by the Sea Parish in Rockaway Beach.

Though amiable, this priest with a tuneful voice is nobody’s fool. He’s been a teacher in remote Alaska and a missionary in Uganda. He walked 7,000 miles across the U.S. and Europe to Bethlehem to call for peace in the Mid-East. He chides leaders who seem to be straying from the path of justice.

But what he gets remembered for often is organizing young college graduates more than four decades ago, giving energy to the church’s lay ministry movement.

The Jesuit Volunteer Corps sees him as one of its key founders. The organization plans a celebration, and likely some teasing, for Father Morris, who turns 80 Sunday.

A Mass and roast are set for 3 p.m.-6 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 21, at St. Mary’s Academy in downtown Portland.

The Jesuit Volunteer Corps began in Alaska, where the Jesuits had been serving since 1886. The seed of the idea was planted when Bishop Francis Gleeson — a bald, energetic, cigar-smoking Jesuit — was spiritual leader of Alaska’s northern frontier during the 1950s. He saw the need for good boarding schools closer to children in remote villages. That gave rise to Copper Valley School, 170 miles east of Anchorage on 462 acres of federal land.

News of the school spread to Jesuit colleges across the lower 48 and volunteers began trekking north to help — and have some adventure. Meanwhile, the St. Ann Sisters recruited young graduates to teach.

A young Jesuit, Father Jack Morris, taught at Copper Valley in the late 1950s. Bishop Gleeson had come to consider the young people an “absolute necessity.” When his first choice to organize the movement died suddenly in 1964, Father Morris got the job.

The energetic priest from Montana would be the one to coin the name Jesuit Volunteer Corps.

"I just saw we had work to do," Father Morris told the Sentinel in 2006. "I was running this thing out of my back pocket." His recruitment brochure called for those "young and old — with adult joy and adult stability. Men and women who dig in, work hard, laugh loud and often. Flexible enough to adjust to diverse companions, tasks and environments."

The Corps would expand to the Midwest in 1974, the East Coast in 1975, the Southwest in 1977 and the South in 1980. It went international in 1984, with programs in Belize, Tanzania, Micronesia, Peru and Nepal. In the 1960s and early 70s, as many as 200 volunteers per year came out of the original Portland Jesuit Volunteer Corps office. Now, it is down to about 80.

But young Catholics are still volunteering. There are just scores of options and the pool is being spread thinner.

"I think this century is the age of the laity," Father Morris says. "These young volunteers get into the engine room of the church and they come out and say, 'The church — It's us! What more can we do, Lord?'"

Former volunteers make up a significant part of the Catholic community in Oregon. Among them are Father John Whitney, leader of the Oregon Province of Jesuits, and Jim Francesconi, a former city councilman. Deacon Brett Edmonson of Holy Cross Parish was a Jesuit Volunteer, as were most of the founders of St. Andrew Nativity School, which serves low income residents of Northeast Portland.

"JVC, as much as it is a service corps, is a formation experience for church leaders," says Maureen Markey, who served in Alaska in the early 1990s. This year, the rest of the regions voted to unify in one office, but the Northwest Volunteer Corps will remain independent.

To reserve a spot at the Oct. 21 event, call Ken Porter at (503) 335-8202.