

PAUL AUCOIN

The Ottawa Citizen/Jan 24/98

'He was always looking for forgiveness'

BY PAULINE TAM

For 20 years, Paul Aucoin devoted his life to comforting the dying, offering solace to cancer patients and their distressed families, lending a hand when there were more mundane concerns to tend to. He seemed able to face pain and suffering with remarkable grace but when it came to his own sorrow, Mr. Aucoin was not able to find peace.

It wasn't until Mr. Aucoin took his life last week that his closest friends learned something of the anguish within him.

A former teacher in a Nova Scotia reform school, Mr. Aucoin had admitted to abusing boys in his care. The stark revelation in newspaper reports prompted shock and disbelief among Mr. Aucoin's many friends in Ottawa: doctors, nurses, co-workers, families of former patients.

Last Saturday, more than 700 people filled the Holy Cross Church on Walkley Road to pay tribute to the Paul Aucoin they knew: a 52-year-old social worker at the Ottawa Civic Hospital who was deeply devoted to the patients he cared for and who earnestly sought spiritual guidance.

"He was a wonderful person who obviously made a mistake in his life. My feeling is he probably spent his whole life trying to make up for that," said Dr. Michelle Simmonds, who first met Mr. Aucoin in the early 1980s when she ran the palliative care program at the Civic Hospital.

"He had a tremendous capacity to understand people's pain and I guess it was because he had been and still was holding a lot of his own pain."

Born in Nova Scotia, Mr. Aucoin was a counsellor and teacher at the province's Shelburne School for Boys in the late 1960s and early '70s. Last May, as part of a provincial investigation into hundreds of allegations of sexual and physical abuse at the youth centre, Mr. Aucoin admitted he had sexually abused three boys.

After making his admission to the investigators, Mr. Aucoin expressed his shame and remorse for his actions at Shelburne. He also said he had sought therapy to deal with what he did and he was acknowledging the sexual encounters "as a sort of way for me to try to make peace with myself."

"It's embarrassing and shaming and very painful for me to be this honest," he told investigators.

"The thing I dread most is the damage this could cause my family and the damage to the reputation I've put together for myself."

Mr. Aucoin's confessions were made public last week after a Nova Scotia lawyer filed a transcript of Mr. Aucoin's interview with investigators as part of his case for a provincially funded review of government files on Shelburne.

Last Thursday, days after newspaper reports detailed his confession, Mr. Aucoin took his life in the Ottawa south home he shared with his wife. Friends say Mr. Aucoin reported for



Paul Aucoin used his energy to help others.

work at the Civic Hospital last Wednesday but he appeared unwell.

Friends said they remember a selfless man who occasionally invited patients to his home for dinner, used his weekends to do the grocery shopping for others under his care, or brought homemade food to someone who needed it.

After one patient died, Mr. Aucoin played matchmaker and eventually introduced the widow to another man, sensing she needed companionship.

While Mr. Aucoin and his wife did not have children of their own, he sometimes took in the children of patients and cared for them in his home.

"He went to a priest's house for spiritual guidance and through that, he met a cook whose son had died in a car accident," recalled Barbara O'Connor, executive director of the Hospice for All Saints where Mr. Aucoin volunteered much of his time.

"He called her daily at noon and said, 'This is your comic relief.'"

The woman and Mr. Aucoin became such good friends that they organized fund-raising teas together to benefit the hospice. They also shared cooking as a favourite pastime and prepared countless meals of fish chowder or lemon chicken for patients looking for something more exotic than home-care services could provide.

Few friends know when Mr. Aucoin relocated to Ottawa. What is known is that after quitting his job at Shelburne, Mr. Aucoin completed a masters degree in social work at Dalhousie University and devoted himself almost exclusively from then on to working with the elderly and the dying. In addition to undergoing psychotherapy, Mr. Aucoin also went to a monastery regularly for spiritual counsel.

"I knew he had a regret, he told me that once," said Ms. O'Connor. "And I know he poured all his energies into helping people. Perhaps it was to make up for his past. He was always looking for forgiveness and I feel sad that he hadn't found it."