

Father Grace taking a swing at more free time



Father Grace stays active playing golf three times a week. Photo/Provided

By Kathryn Reed

Father Grace is finally slowing down.

He told Barton Memorial Hospital this month to no longer call him in an emergency. For decades the staff would call him at all hours of the night if a patient requested to see him or someone had taken a turn for the worse.

But he's not done with the South Lake Tahoe medical facility. He plans to keep popping in to see if there are patients who might want his counsel – even if they aren't Catholic.

John Grace will be 93 years old on Sept. 18. Most of those

years have been spent in the basin. He moved here in 1956. This was when about 100 people lived in town during the winter.

He moved from Ireland to Sacramento in 1948 at a time when the United States needed Catholic priests and it was near impossible to get a job in his native country.

And while he is in a serious business, he seldom doesn't have a smile and he knows how to have fun.

Not long after he arrived in Tahoe he was driving down Echo Summit into the basin when two elephants came running toward his vehicle. Not knowing what to do he drove between them. He told parishioners about this and they apparently worried Grace might have gotten into the communal wine.

Then word got out there had been a circus in Nevada that was using the elephants to pull a truck and the chains broke loose. So, there really were elephants roaming in the Sierra Nevada.

Grace has always been about doing what's right for the community. It didn't take him long to realize South Lake Tahoe needed a hospital. It was 50 years ago this year that the hospital's doors opened.

Grace signed the paperwork establishing Barton as a nonprofit organization. He was also part of the committee that applied for the federal grant that provided matching funds for the construction of the hospital.

"When the hospital opened I started visiting the patients and have been doing so ever since," Grace told *Lake Tahoe News*. "That is a calling of a priest; to take care of the sick. They are the people who need you. As a priest that is one of your callings. If don't do that, you are not doing your duty."

He used to be on the hospital's board of directors. But when

they started meeting on Sunday mornings he had to resign. He joked it was their way to get him off the board. At that time his Sunday mornings were reserved for delivering Mass at St. Theresa Catholic Church.

It was in 1997 that he stopped being the full time clergy at the local church.

“I wanted to get away from administration work. I retired as pastor, which meant I didn’t do any administration. I assisted with Masses on Sunday,” Grace said.

But to this day he is not fully retired. The people won’t let him. He continues to perform weddings, funerals and baptisms when families ask him to. He is now on the third generation for some families when it comes to baptisms.

Grace, still with a bit of an Irish accent, jokes that he fell through the cracks and that’s why the bishop left him in South Lake Tahoe.

Part of the truth is he didn’t mind the snow and others did. He would be the one firing up the old Dodge to plow the parking lot before services.

Grace is responsible for the church, Grace Hall and the K-6 school getting built.

Doug Morris has known Grace since moving here in 1962 as a high school sophomore. His dad was the minister at the Presbyterian Church. This was during the time of Vatican II and students from various religious backgrounds were brought together to discuss the changes in the Catholic Church.

After getting married, Morris converted to Catholicism. Now he sees Grace on a regular basis – at the hospital where he is a volunteer for the auxiliary and on the golf course each week.

Golfing is how Grace would spend his one day off from the church.

“It was relaxing. It got me out, away from the desk, and meeting people,” Grace said.

Today he is on the course three days a week. It might be Lake Tahoe Golf Course or Edgewood Tahoe, and usually Genoa in the winter.

“He’s a little competitive. He likes to have a good score,” Morris said.

It’s not unusual for Grace to be playing and for people to come up to him and reflect on a time he helped them.

Golf is such a part of who he is that St. Theresa School named a tournament after him. Sept. 12 was the second annual Father Grace Golf Tournament, which is a fundraiser for the school.