



## Fangman roast MUCH loved by full house

*By Anne Walsh, Communications Committee*

How do roasters go “scorched-earth” on a beloved priest who’s served Omaha communities with unending joy and comfort for 30 years? Turns out they don’t – except for a surprise speaker who once chased the honoree with a meat cleaver. More on that later.

A sold-out crowd attending the Oct. 30 event enshrining Rev. Tom Fangman as the 184th Face on the Barroom Floor heard plenty of witty zingers, though, with several roasters weaving hilarious tales of “the most connected person in Omaha.”

The love was palpable, especially during an impromptu, club-wide chorus of “Happy Birthday” celebrating Fangman’s 64th year.

He's been pastor at St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Elkhorn, one of the state's largest, since 2016. He previously served several other parishes and nonprofits, including Sacred Heart Parish in Omaha, where he was CEO of CUES (Christian Urban Education Service) and foundation member of the Heart Ministry Center.

Kicking off the evening with a lighthearted mealtime prayer was Rev. Dave Korth, who succeeded Fangman as pastor of Sacred Heart. Declaring that "imitation is the highest form of flattery" in a spot-on impersonation, Korth's enactment of Fangman's mannerisms included arms swept heavenward, with dramatic pauses centered on the word "much."

"We thank you. We praise you for MUCH, because there is MUCH," he intoned. "We're grateful so that we can go forward with MUCH."

Talented emcee Nikki Boulay is a vocalist with the Finest Hour Band, voice actor and she's best-known as Fangman's back-up singer.

"At weddings, he begins by turning to the bride and groom and says, 'Look at ya' both; you look like you should be on the top of a wedding cake.' So tonight we're flipping the script – Fr. Tom, look at you! You look like you should be on the Barroom Floor."

Initially hesitant when asked to emcee the Face event, Boulay said, "I thought, 'a roast of Fr. Tom? What's next, a Mother Teresa take-down?'"

Asking for a quick show of hands with the question, "How many of you think you're Fr. Tom's best friend," Boulay surveyed the unanimous response and said, "You are so cute if you think you're the ones."

And in what became a theme among the roasters regarding Fangman's penmanship, she observed, "Next thing you'll tell me is you can clearly read the last note he sent you."

Boulay said Fangman's wonderful qualities could never be summed up in one night, but his top three traits are kindness, uncanny memory and joy for life.

"You take kindness to a rare level: tenderness. Your ability to meet people in brutally difficult, raw and deeply private moments is something to behold," she said. "And you often speak of being with people in their 'holy moments' – I think everyone would agree it's you who make the moments holy."

Joe Lang, founding principal, RDG Planning & Design, said he's "only known" Fangman for 40 years, compared to other roasters' longer friendships. So, he consulted Chat GPT for more lowdown.

"I simply typed in, 'Write a short roast that's humorous about Fr. Tom,'" he said. "I didn't even type in 'Fangman from Omaha, Nebraska,' and it started spitting out pages." After replacing toner and paper several times, Lang possessed three Fangman-based tomes:

“Tommy the Early Years: Development of Social Graces,” the tale of how he often invited half his Creighton Prep class home to party, somehow passing it off to his parents as “just a few students.”

“Midlife Crisis: Man of the Cloth, Life of the Party,” in which a singular truism emerged: When you sing with conviction, pitch is optional.

“Fr. Tom: A Peek Under the Cassock,” the largest compilation highlighting his love of hamburgers, which he treats as a “reward, hobby and a warm-up snack before his workouts.”

So deep is his quest for ground meat, Fangman elected to forgo the Face event’s dual entrée of beef filet with maître d’hôtel butter and chicken marsala, in favor of a large hamburger surrounded by ketchup.

The Cassock compilation also covers Fangman’s athleticism and fitness, which Lang describes as “Rubenesque.”

He recalled their early, competitive years on the Barrett’s Barleycorn sand volleyball court, where their team name, “Fr. Hollywood’s Kids,” foreshadowed Fangman’s vocation.

Lang also described the pastor’s love of ski-lift gondola rides, where unwitting passengers engage in conversation, and “by the time you get to the top, you’ve invited him to dinner; promised the use of your slope-side condo, and made a pledge to St. Patrick’s Catholic Church building fund.”

Boasting 50 years of friendship, Tenaska Associate Joe Finocchiaro spoke of Fangman’s infinite capacity to create lasting friendships and love for great parties. “Tom was Snoop Dog before there was Snoop Dog,” he said.

He saw firsthand Fangman’s “takeover” of the University of Kansas. “We witnessed this unknown kid become one of the most well-connected coeds on campus. He knew everyone. Girls loved him, and no wonder. He spoke their language: fashion, pop trends, diets, gossip, soap operas, you name it. Guys loved him, too, because he was the go-to for finding us fraternity party dates we couldn’t find for ourselves.”

Finocchiaro described Fangman’s frequent dietary failures, compounded by his under-the-radar runs to Vista Hamburgers in Lawrence. On one clandestine trip, his big, yellow Pontiac Bonneville became high-centered on the drive-through lane’s concrete divider. He made a desperate call and numerous fraternity pledges responded, lifting his car off the barrier so Vista’s drive-through could reopen.

“Tom is also a horrible singer, and he refuses to get the message. We’ve tried. On a caravan road trip to see Bruce Springsteen in Chicago, the Boss’s catalog was playing non-stop,

and so was Tom's annoying singing," he said. After several warnings, they pulled over and forced Fangman from the car. Mercifully, other friends trailing in the caravan picked up the vexed vocalist.

Longtime friend Meg Huerter Brudney began with a question: "How many people heard Tom come up and say, 'Oh my God I'm so glad you're here; you're my favorite table. . . but don't tell the other tables.'" Met with rousing applause, Brudney looked at the honoree and said, "I'm so on to you, Tom Fangman."

The head of school for Duchesne Academy of the Sacred Heart said she attended KU with Fangman, in the years when he was contemplating his calling. "So what do you do when trying to discern a vocation? Some work at nonprofits, but not Tom; he worked at a very high-end, couture men's clothing store. Nothing prepares you to be a future priest more than Ralph Lauren polos."

He focused on becoming an archdiocesan priest, claiming he wanted to stay in Omaha with his loving family and friends, instead of being sent to other cities as required by the Jesuits. "But to be honest," Brudney said, "he simply wanted to skip that pesky vow of poverty."

During Fangman's first year in the seminary, she recalled attending a wedding in Chicago with him and a female friend. Leaving late, they decided to overnight in the Quad Cities, but every hotel was booked. So the trio shared a room, "no big deal, we were all friends," which resulted in a spiritual lecture once Fangman arrived back in Omaha at St. Cecilia's Cathedral.

"He was ranting and talking about our ordeal to Fr. Mainelli, and Father said, 'Tom, you are studying to be a priest now; you cannot spend the night in a hotel with two single women,'" she said. "And Tom's quick response was, 'But Father, it was like Mary and Joseph, there was no room at the inn.'"

Greg Boulay, president and CEO of Pella Windows and Doors, noted the roast's emerging themes on Fangman's personality. "We've spent much of our adult lives fighting weight and rationalizing everything we do; for me it's booze, for you it's Thousand Island dressing," said Boulay to Fangman. "You love dinner, especially the social part of dinner. We all know his phone blows up all the time, but when he's with you, he's with you."

Boulay called out Fangman's penmanship skills. "The whole writing thing is hilarious. All of us have received notes and cards from Tom, and my wife and I approach them like crossword puzzles. We do it because we don't want to get dementia."

"When I get a thank-you, I hand it to her and say, 'Do you want to take the first run at it?' Then I go pour a cup of coffee, come back in, and we'll go four down, eight across. Most of you can relate to that, can't you?"

Since he and his friends were not very athletic while at Creighton Prep, they decided to give music a try. Over the years, Boulay began piecing together musicians, mostly from out of town and including his sister Nikki (the roast's emcee), to form the highly successful band "Finest Hour."

"But really, we became Tom Fangman's house band. I don't know who adopted who, but it morphed into the Sacred Heart festival, and then the St. Pat's festival," he said. Despite the low-paying, Fangman-initiated gigs, Boulay says the band loves the pastor.

"Matt Wallace said it best, 'That padre, anytime he calls and wants us to do something, we're in,'" said Boulay. "But Tom, Finocchiaro's right: you suck at singing."

And now for the surprise speaker who brandished a meat cleaver: Tom's own brother, Denny Fangman, visiting from Arizona. Denny agreed to attend the Face event, but only if he could be a roaster.

"I didn't want to come just to listen to other people. You guys were all real nice to Tom. I've never seen a roast like this; most people get torn apart, so that's what I've prepared," Denny said.

"I've got a little different perspective – the agony of growing up with the guy. It kind of feels like my birthday to roast Tommy. I've been waiting for this my entire life."

Denny's childhood narrative is as follows: When Tom was babysitting him, he started "pushing his buttons," so Denny picked up a meat cleaver and gave chase. Around they went, until Tom fled to his bedroom and locked the door – whereupon Denny began hacking at it. "And when I finished, all I heard from behind the door was, 'You are in sooo muuuch trouble!'"

They obviously patched things up and in later years, Tom confided to Denny that he was thinking about becoming a priest. "And I said, 'Tom, I don't know if that's a good idea. You hate public speaking; you don't like being around people, and you hate being the center of attention. How about something more suited to your skills, like a Navy SEAL, diesel mechanic or alligator hunter?'"

Denny said he's sent Tom's written cards to a Harvard linguist for interpretation, but the feedback said simply, "It looks alien." Brandishing a thank-you note from his brother, Denny offered the audience \$100 to "whoever can tell me what it says." But he offered Tom a solution: "Just send texts. What you save on stamps you could have funded that new church alone."

The "Unveiling of the Face" was led by Roger Humphries, chairman of the Face on the Barroom Floor Committee. The portrait features Fangman holding a sword of St. Ignatius, signifying an award from Creighton Prep. Various other logos and elements represent the

schools he attended and led, as well as numerous nonprofits, and community awards for service.

Longtime OPC Board Member Liz Hruska then presented Fangman with “birthday checks” made out to the Heart Ministry Center in his honor.

As the fifth priest to be recognized in the 54-year history of the Face event, an emotional Fangman addressed the crowd, which rose in a standing ovation after earlier serenading him with, “May the Blessing of the Lord Be Upon You.”

“There are some times in life you just want to put in slow motion because you want to take it all in. This is one of them,” he said. “I try to live by a theme, ‘cherish where you’re at with the ones you love to be with.’ And my mom used to say when we were younger, ‘Show me your friends and I’ll tell you who you are.’ I’ve always remembered that.”

He professed his love for Omaha, being part of the community and said there’s nowhere else he’d rather be. The thought of becoming a Jesuit really did give him pause because, “Every one of them ends up in Milwaukee.”

And in a nudge to Brudney’s earlier quip, he added, “God really blessed me with faith, family and friends. The more the merrier. I really WOULD love to be at all your tables!”