



## Meet Father Nicholas Rashford, S.J.

The idiom “Will it play in Peoria?” became popular in the vaudeville era and was used to indicate that if a show was successful in Peoria, it would be successful anywhere. It was also an oft-quoted line from characters in a novel by Horatio Alger who specialized in stories about impoverished young boys and their rise from humble backgrounds to lives of middle-class security and comfort through good works.

All of which relates to Father Nicholas Rashford, who was born in Peoria, Illinois, has been successful everywhere and, like one of Alger’s characters, rose from humble beginnings and has performed good works throughout his life.

The story begins in County Galway, Ireland with a woman named Bridget Canavan who emigrated to America with a plan to settle in Boston with her sister Mary once her sister Nora arrived on a later ship. Fate intervened when Mary suffered a medical condition that prevented her from traveling and the family, expressing concerns about the two sisters living alone in Boston, insisted they settle in Chicago to live with an aunt who had emigrated years earlier.

It was in Chicago where Bridget met Nicholas Patrick Rashford, a blacksmith and welder, who had emigrated from County Wexford in search of a better life. back injury Nicholas Patrick Rashford who emigrated to America in search of a better life and settled in Chicago, Illinois. The two, who had never met in Ireland, became romantically involved and soon thereafter moved to Peoria, Illinois where Patrick landed employment as a welder with Caterpillar. In Peoria they bought a home in an Irish neighborhood and raised their only child, Nicholas, in an environment that emphasized the value of a quality education. On holidays priests and nuns were frequent guests in the Rashford home and they planted the seed of attending college as a path for young Nicholas.

Nicholas graduated from Spalding High School in 1958 and upon graduation served in the Navy as an electronics technician from 1959 to 1962. After his discharge from the service, he was hired by International Telephone and Telegraph where he worked for two years as a training manager for their federal electronic division. In 1964 he made a decision, perhaps influenced from all of those holiday dinners surrounded by clergy, to pursue a religious life and entered the Society of Jesus.

Nicholas embraced his parents value for education graduating from St. Louis University in 1968 with an undergraduate degree in Sociology/Philosophy and then going on to graduate with a master’s degree in Urban Affairs/Theology in 1972. In 1972 Nicholas was ordained as a priest and continued his academic pursuits which led to being awarded the prestigious Alfred P. Sloan Fellow which he completed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1973.

Father Rashford became the first Roman Catholic priest to work for a private sector employer when he served as Vice-President of Corporate Personnel for the defense contractor, McDonnell-Douglas. He went on to a distinguished career in academia and business including tenures as the chairman of the Delaware Port Authority, the Dean of the School of Business Management at Rockhurst University, a board member for the Irish Consumer Foods Board, and the President of Saint Joseph’s University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

While at Saint Joseph's University's Father Rashford oversaw more than \$100 million worth of campus expansion and beautification projects including placement of lights on Finnesey Field, renovation of Alumni Memorial Fieldhouse, installation of an artificial surface on Finnesey Field, and construction of the Robert M. Gillin Jr. Boathouse, the first boathouse to be built on the Schuylkill River in 98 years.

In the course of an amazing journey through life Father Rashford had occasion to attend the inauguration of John F. Kennedy, the opening of the Vatican Council, and serve as a crew member on a ship sent to intercept ships during the Cuba missile crisis in October of 1964.

Father Rashford is the epitome of the impoverished young men who rise from humble beginnings to a successful life of performing good works. Along the way Father Rashford enjoyed success in locations around the globe including stops in China, El Salvador, England, France, Germany, Italy proving that if you can make it in Peoria you can indeed make it anywhere!