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Music, Dance and Mission: Rob Hardies Leads Historic All Souls Congregation

“Starr King School’s
insistence that a well
prepared human soul
can respond to difficult times
gave me the trust that I
could respond.”

The Rev. Rob Hardies started his dream job two days before passenger planes smashed into icons of American military and corporate might, changing the world forever.

“That sermon on Sept. 9, 2001,” said the senior minister of All Souls, Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C., “seems so naïve and innocent now.

Since then Hardies has witnessed a flood of new parishioners who have more than doubled the size of his congregation to 650.

The months following the tragedy were a tumultuous time for a relatively new minister who had spent the previous year at the Sierra Foothills Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Auburn, Calif., after graduating from Starr King in 2000.

“I watched Rebecca Parker (SKSM president) model what it means to be a public religious leader,” Hardies said. “Starr King School’s insistence that a well prepared human soul can respond to difficult times gave me the trust that I could respond when I took the pulpit after 9/11.”

When Hardies arrived at All Souls, the church offered a small covenant group ministry program and a couple of social justice programs.

“It was an under-performing church lost in the doldrums,” he said of one of the Unitarian Universalist movement’s most venerable congregations.

Established in 1821, All Souls’ history includes a Who’s Who of notable Americans. John Quincy Adams and John C. Calhoun were among its founders, and pre-Civil War abolitionists Edward Everett Hale, Samuel Longfellow and William Henry Channing served as ministers.



The Rev. Rob Hardies, 2000 Starr King graduate.

Former slave and abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass attended church services.

Since 2001, Hardies, along with associate minister and Starr King graduate Shana Goodwin ('99), has established a set of covenant group ministries that now involve 120 members of the congregation. These days the church also offers a growing adult spiritual development program; 11 active social justice committees, the strongest organized around voting rights and affordable housing; three choirs and a dancer-in-residence program.

“We have a vibrant worship service and music program full of percussion and spirit,” Hardies said. “It’s a real draw.”

All Souls is located in the Columbia Heights neighborhood of Washington, D.C., an area battered by race riots in the past. The church’s history of racial diversity dates back to the 1950s. Now the neighborhood is gentrifying rapidly, pushing out longtime low-income residents.

“We’re trying to find ways to preserve the economic, racial and cultural diversity of Columbia Heights,” Hardies said, “by affiliating with the Washington Interfaith Network, which organizes churches to build social and political power.”

Hardies’ congregation joined a coalition

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Grapevine

Barbara Threet ('02) completed her first year of ministry at First Parish Universalist church in Fitchburg, Mass. She serves on the UUA Clara Barton District board of trustees and is involved in the formation of a Minority Coalition in Fitchburg as well as a joint clergy-police effort to support at-risk teens. With the help of her church, she said she bought a "wonderful home" built in 1847.

Jan Johnson ('00) offers private pastoral counseling in Concord, Calif., and is affiliated with the Mt. Diablo UU Church as a community minister, preaching and leading workshops on grief and bereavement. She recently began working on a UUA committee that supports continuing education and professional development for UU ministers.

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SKSM Student Honors All Souls with Sugar and Altars in Latino Tradition

"I've been making altars all my life. It's a spiritual practice for me."

Sugary skulls decorated with sequin eyes, gold foil mantillas and brightly-colored frosting took shape in Starr King School's kitchen under the creative direction of third-year student Jen Devine. Soon they would soon grace altars at the Oakland Museum of California's annual Dia de los Muertos installation, a Latino tradition that honors All Saints Day on Nov. 1, and All Souls Day on Nov. 2.

"I've been making altars all my life," Devine said. "It's a spiritual practice for me."

She invited other SKSM students to pitch in and stir white cane sugar in a big bowl with meringue powder (egg whites) and water, then tamp the mixture into skull molds. Be Patterson, Trish Schwartzberg and Sally Hamlin helped Devine make about 100 skulls the first day.

On the second day, they were ready to embellish the little faces, now hardened to a glittering white.

"Each of us decorated in remembrance of someone who died," said Devine, who squeezed frosting into musical notes on a special skull to honor her musician brother, recently killed in a car accident. "That's so the spirits can recognize themselves on the altar."

In Mexico, families festoon home altars



SKSM student Jen Devine works on a sugar skull for Day of the Dead celebrations.

with wreaths, crosses, silk flowers, candles, votive lights, photos and the candy skulls. They also gather at family burial plots to leave offerings of special foods and to picnic amongst the gravestones, a reunion often accompanied by noisy fireworks.

Devine created her own version of this tradition when she lived in the Mission District of San Francisco, near a corner suffering from misuse and neglect. She cleaned the area, made an altar space and adorned it with symbols of all the world's religions. When the war in Iraq broke out, she turned it into a peace altar. Locals responded, adding ribbons, prayers and flowers.

Devine's Nov. 5 Oakland Museum event, a collaboration with artists from the California College of the Arts in Oakland and the Mission Cultural Center in San Francisco, featured the cardinal elements – water, fire, air and earth – laid out in four directions, with a decorated altar at each point and a "central altar to the self" in the middle. The fire altar featured chili peppers, cigarettes, lighters, candles and brilliant colors. Nearby, a video screen displayed images of forest fires, burning bushes, war, guns and more. Fire spinners, who whirl flaming poi balls at the end of chains,

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of about 50 churches throughout Washington, D.C., and lobbied the city council for a special appropriation to fund neighborhood investment. The coalition was awarded \$100 million. All Souls, partnering with a Latino Catholic church down the street, received \$10 million to create affordable housing in Columbia Heights.

All Souls is working with national corporations, such as Target, Whole Foods and Bed, Bath and Beyond, to invest their capital in municipal bonds funded by sales tax revenue. Earnings will go towards rental housing and affordable home ownership in Columbia Heights, an area of the city that in recent years has shifted from a mostly African American population to a significant number of Latinos.

Some of those new neighbors are showing up at All Souls services.

"We face critical decisions in the next five years about how to become more multi-cultural with this growth," Hardies said. "Do we go to more than one service? Build? Add staff? Expand hours?"

He says the average age of new members falls in the 20 to 40 range, and they come with young children. About 100 new parishioners join a year, and they find a church style with a West Coast flair.

"We're less buttoned down than East Coast churches," he said, "with a spirit-filled energy that doesn't seem native to Washington, D.C."

It's this energy that Hardies loves about his church. He says he's still "pinching himself" that he quickly got the job he dreamed of as a SKSM student. His education at Starr King, he says, prepared him for the responsibilities of a high-profile ministry, as did his work experience before seminary. After graduating from Cornell University, Hardies served four years as director of a faith-based affordable housing development corporation in Portland, Ore., and worked as a human rights "accompanier," traveling with Guatemalan villagers back to their homes after 12 years spent in Mexican refugee camps because of human rights abuses.

"I'm interested in politics," Hardies said, "and All Souls – a vibrant, urban flagship for our movement – was the church I most wanted to serve."

Hardies is a member of D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams' Interfaith Advisory Board. To read more about All Souls, Unitarian, visit www.all-souls.org.

Grad's Film Wins Lawmaker's Support



Melissa Mummert (left) with Kasaundra and Rep. Maxine Waters (right).

For the last four years, Melissa Mummert ('03) has worked on a documentary about Hamedah Hasan, who's serving a 27-year sentence in federal prison for her first non-violent drug offense. Because of Mummert's film, a California lawmaker has pledged to help gain Hasan's release.

"Through telling Hasan's story," Mummert said, "I'm trying to bring the need for drug policy reform to public consciousness."

Hasan is the mother of three children, who've struggled to maintain a home during her 11-year absence. She's currently incarcerated at FCI Victorville, a prison camp in Southern California.

The Interfaith Drug Policy Initiative, a group based in Washington, D.C., saw the trailer for Mummert's film and invited her to speak at their September conference about the need to end mandatory minimum sentences. Hasan's daughter, Kasaundra, joined Mummert in addressing faith leaders from different denominations as well as Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.) and Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) from the Congressional Black Caucus. Kasaundra's story about the difficulties she faced raising her sisters without their mother inspired Waters to visit Hasan in prison and work to help win her freedom.

Mummert plans to finish her documentary in February 2005 and look for screening opportunities at UU churches, film festivals and on public television..

Sugar Skulls, continued...

performed for an enthusiastic crowd.

But first Devine displayed the beautiful sugar skulls at SKSM's All Souls Day chapel. The Rev. Lilia Cuervo of the First Unitarian Church in San Jose, a SKSM grad and associate faculty member, preached and musicians performed. Attendees offered flowers and memories of loved ones who had passed on. Then everyone danced.

Advancement News

"We're pleased to announce, said the Rev. Kelly Flood, SKSM Vice President for Advancement, "that the Arthur Vining Davis Foundation of Jacksonville, Fla., has granted Starr King School \$150,000 to fund a Studies in Public Ministry Director. This position will further the school's commitment to the public character of religious leadership and its renewal in Unitarian Universalism and elsewhere in religious life."

Through the UUA's planned giving services, including the "umbrella giving" program, since 2001 Starr King School has received \$588,000 in planned gifts from donors who recognize and support the need for high-quality Unitarian Universalist theological education to prepare ministers and religious leaders.

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