

Roderick Nesbitt, 1952 - 2010

Former actor was massage therapist at McGaw YMCA in Evanston

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Roderick Nesbitt was a healer of bodies and lives in his work as a substance-abuse counselor and massage therapist.

"He showed respect and appreciation for each person because of who they are — and would always do it with a smile," said Bill Geiger, president and CEO of the McGaw YMCA in Evanston, where Mr. Nesbitt worked as a massage therapist.

Mr. Nesbitt, 58, died in Swedish Covenant Hospital after suffering a heart attack Sunday, July 4.

He started working at the YMCA in 2005, shortly after he graduated from the Soma Institute, a massage school. During his five years at the YMCA, Mr. Nesbitt became a friend and mentor to his colleagues and patients.

"He so enjoyed everybody he met and made people feel valued," Geiger said.

Mr. Nesbitt, the youngest of four siblings, was born in Chicago's North Lawndale neighborhood. His mother, Peggy, was a kindergarten teacher. His father, Lendor, was an obstetrician and gynecologist.

After graduating from Francis W. Parker School, Roderick Nesbitt spent most of the 1970s pursuing a career as an actor. He did a short stint as a member of Chicago's Body Politic Theatre, and later moved to New York City, where he hoped to land an acting role.

"He couldn't get any good parts," said Prexy Nesbitt, his cousin.

Mr. Nesbitt then moved to Wisconsin, where his parents lived in retirement. The death of a family member in the mid-1980s made him rethink his career path, and he went back to school to become a substance-abuse therapist.

During an Independence Day barbecue in 1989, Mr. Nesbitt met his soon-to-be wife, Julie.

"We just fell in love," Julie Parson Nesbitt said Monday. The couple married two years later.

In 1994, they moved to Milwaukee, where Mr. Nesbitt worked as a substance-abuse therapist at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

"Rod was a man of tremendous generosity," said Mr. Nesbitt's sister, Ann. Among the many people he helped was a homeless woman who was pregnant and abusing drugs, she said. Mr. Nesbitt helped her find a home and guided her through rehabilitation.

In 1996, Mr. Nesbitt and his wife returned to Chicago to be closer to their family. He continued working in Milwaukee until 2005, when he became a part-time massage therapist at the McGaw YMCA to have more free time with his son, David, now 5.

"Breakthroughs from talk therapy occurred rarely, but with only 30 minutes of massage therapy, the benefits are immediate," Mr. Nesbitt was quoted as saying in a YMCA profile.

Mr. Nesbitt also is survived by his brothers, Reese and Robin.

A memorial service will be held at 1 p.m. Tuesday at Francis W. Parker School, 330 W. Webster Ave., Chicago.

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