

## Connecticut Post

On the Internet March 31 and in print on April 1, 2014

# Church organist is looking for another gig

By Keila Torres Ocasio



*David McCaffrey, of Ansonia, talks about his long tenure as music director and organist at St. Augustine Cathedral Tuesday, Mar. 18, 2014, at the church in Bridgeport, Conn. Photo: Autumn Driscoll*

BRIDGEPORT -- Like the hymns he plays, [David McCaffrey](#) knows every beginning has an end.

But as he sat in front of the St. [Augustine Church](#) organ staring up at the larger console on the balcony, he still felt helpless.

"I don't know what I would do if I didn't play," he said in his soft, whispery voice. "The organ is my life."

In the 1950s, when he was born, it seemed everyone had a piano. So in the third grade, the Massachusetts native first began playing the instrument.

But it was the organ pipe melody echoing through St. [Polycarps Church](#) in Somerville, Mass., during Requiem High Masses for his father that enthralled a 9-year-old McCaffrey.

At 13, his mother bought him his own piano. At 14, organist [Helen Leahy McManus](#) gave him a chance at the instrument he really wanted to play.

To this day, her picture sits on his organ console for inspiration.

"My music teacher said, 'You know I could use you at the children's mass at church,' " he said, leaning back against a pew. "I said to her well how do you play the pedals?"

It was the start of a love affair. While other boys his age practiced football after school, McCaffrey tapped the organ keys and hit those pedals.

By senior year, he was good enough to be chosen for the job directing a choir of 55 men and boys when the previous director passed away suddenly.

They played throughout the Archdiocese of Boston and traveled to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C.

Several priests also took him under their wing, including Rev. [David Gallagher](#), of [Emmanuel College](#) in Boston, who served as his instructor for some time while McCaffrey was the accompanist for the school's choral society.

"My teachers taught on the collegiate level, so if you studied with them it was tantamount to being in the school," McCaffrey said. "There was none of this online thing."

In 1974, when draft beers were just a quarter, he got a scholarship to [Fairfield University](#) and studied the organ and theology. He then went on to get a master's degree in organ from [Yale University](#).

After returning to Massachusetts for a year, McCaffrey moved back to Connecticut and began teaching at St. Joseph's High School in Trumbull.

In 1992, he got a dream job as director of music at St. [Augustine Cathedral](#).

"And I've been here ever since," said McCaffrey.

These days, he can rattle a long list of all the parishes in Connecticut and Massachusetts where he has played.

It hasn't always been easy though. When he turned 50, the problems started.

Arthritis in his right hip. A complication of his diabetes that caused his foot bones to weaken -- called charcot foot. Two heart valve replacements. A spleen removal. High blood pressure. And surgery last year to remove part of his lung because of cancer.

"But I overcame all of the difficulties," he said. "I worked hard."

"To get back to his pipe organ?" he was asked. "Amen," he responded, smiling.

Now living in Ansonia, McCaffrey is used to performing twice a week at both St. Patrick's Church and at the cathedral.

"I've often said to people, 'I wonder if anyone even cares what I'm playing or listens,' " he said, "and they said, 'David you help me to pray.' "

Last month, McCaffrey took his final bow at St. Augustine. He was let go from his position.

"The diocese is very grateful for his contributions over the years," said [Brian Wallace](#), a spokesman for the Diocese of Bridgeport. "He played at both parish and diocesan functions and his work is well-known and respected by many. He leaves esteemed and respected, but the cathedral parish has taken a different direction musically."

Wallace did not elaborate on what that direction would be.

"I don't understand why this has happened," McCaffrey said. "It's very painful. This is my family."

Still, he won't speak badly about his beloved church. He also wouldn't change a thing in his 50-year career.

"I'm very grateful to the Lord for giving me this musical talent and the ability to develop it," he said. "Of all the people he could have chosen, he chose me. And I'm very cognizant of that." "I've had a very rich, satisfying and wonderful musical career," he added, sounding like a man prepared for an ending.



*David McCaffrey, of Ansonia, sits at the organ at St. Augustine Cathedral in Bridgeport, Conn. Tuesday, Mar. 18, 2014. Photo: Autumn Driscoll*



*A photo of David McCaffrey's first organ teacher, Helen Leahy McManus, sits inside the organ at St. Augustine Cathedral in Bridgeport, Conn. where McCaffrey has long been the music director for the church. Photo: Autumn Driscoll*

**Additional photos on the newspaper's web site:**

**<http://www.ctpost.com/local/article/Church-organist-is-looking-for-another-gig-5364686.php#photo-6037708>**