

No. 148 Tom O'Connor February 2016

What better way for the Omaha Press Club to kick off a Super Bowl weekend than to honor one of the club's longtime superstars?

That was the happy occasion when Tom O'Connor became the 148th "Face on the Barroom Floor" in front of a sold-out crowd.

In typically modest fashion, O'Connor said he worried that "20 years from now, I'll be the answer to a trivia question: 'I know the rest of these "Faces" (on the OPC walls), but who the hell is this Tom O'Connor guy?'"

Not to worry. A club-record sellout crowd for the dinner and roast ensured that Face No. 148 will long be remembered and recognized. (Tom won't be the only recognizable "T.O." on the OPC floor and wall, however. Somebody by the name of Tom Osborne was Face No. 19 in 1979).

The huge turnout for O'Connor reflected the friends and associations he has made in his 28-year public relations career at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, where he is senior associate director of communications. And it saluted O'Connor's 38-year OPC membership, including his 15th year leading the Face committee. Tom also organizes the popular Shatel Sports Lunches. He was OPC president in 2001.

Emcee for the roast was World-Herald columnist Mike Kelly. In acknowledgment of O'Connor's Catholic upbringing and service as an altar boy, Kelly rang an altar bell --with limited success -- to keep the roasters on schedule.

Some of the sharper darts from the roasters:

Nicole Lindquist, director of communications for the Iowa West Foundation: "Tom struggled to find a picture for tonight's program cover. He was really stressed about finding one with his new glasses, and now I can see why. They're your best feature!"

John Murphy, president of J. Murphy & Associates: "Tom plays a lot of golf -- Monday at Johnny Goodman, Thursday at Elmwood, Saturday at Miracle Hill and tries to get in another round on Sunday. If only all of us could work for the government."

Bill O'Neill, director of public relations for the University of Nebraska Medical Center: "It killed Tom when our internal newsletter limited its stories to 300 words. He complained: 'I can't tell a story without eight or nine fabricated quotes!'"

Rick Ruggles, health reporter for the World-Herald, said O'Connor's scathing food critique after a university trip to China ("What looks like a simple piece of meat can

quickly turn into a huge mistake") touched off an international incident. Ruggles said then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had to mend fences with the Chinese, telling them: "Don't let it bother you. That's just Tom O'Connor, a schmuck from Nebraska."

Jim Cavanaugh, Douglas County commissioner and O'Connor's roommate at Creighton University: "I helped Tom and (future wife) Karen hook up. I'd like to take this occasion to publicly apologize to Karen. I beg your forgiveness."

Steve Villamonte, OPC executive director: "Tom, you know you're a tightwad when your club keeps items on the menu just for you: grilled cheese and chili."

Capping the evening's festivities were proclamations from Mayor Jean Stothert declaring Feb. 5 "Tom O'Connor Day" and from Gov. Pete Ricketts commissioning Tom an admiral in the Great Navy of the State of Nebraska.

In addition, Dr. Steve Hinrichs, "bioterrorism czar" and chairman of pathology and microbiology at the Medical Center, used football terminology to present O'Connor a "first and only Line Man of the Decade" award for Tom's line-editing and other assistance with news releases about the Medical Center's biocontainment unit and other public health issues.

Artist Jim Horan's newest "Face on the Barroom Floor" places O'Connor, holding a golf club, in the middle of UNMC. He is flanked by some of his favorite "Faces" (Doug and Greg McDermott, Bob Gibson, Alexander Payne, Johnny Carson, Larry the Cable Guy, Mary Maxwell and Clayton Anderson). Elsewhere on the drawing are those on Tom's "wish list" (President Obama, Pope Francis, Michael Jordan, George Clooney and Alex Gordon).

Also in the caricature is Tom's most favorite face, wife Karen, even though she's not on the barroom floor.

Completing the picture are logos of Tom's favorite teams -- the Creighton Bluejays and the Iowa Hawkeyes.

What did the newest "Face" have to say about all of this?

First to the roasters: O'Connor noted that he was the target of at least nine bald jokes. He retorted with this alleged passage from the Bible: "And so it was that God created only a few perfect heads. The rest, he put hair on them."

And as for the toasts, Tom said: "Amazing as it may sound, PR people don't like to be the center of attention. We like to blow the horn for other people, not ourselves. I have to say this has been the most uncomfortable thing I've ever done.

"Seriously, I can't thank you folks enough for stepping up for me tonight. I'm truly humbled. It's a night I'll never forget."

