

Father Dumais and the Gents

How five Missoula men became one extraordinary family

Families are where you find them. And on an early Thursday morning in a cozy house tucked against the base of Mount Sentinel, one family in particular can be found going through its morning paces. Everyone in the house knows how it works: Father George Dumais is making lunches in triplicate. Three thick sandwiches sit in a row, flanked by three cookies, three bags of Cheetos and three pieces of fruit—one whole apple, one sliced apple and one banana.



Having already set out breakfast, Bill lingers beside Father Dumais in the kitchen, offering a second set of hands in the lunch-making assembly line. Kenny is downstairs getting showered and dressed. Jimmy, known around the home as Little Man, is harder to keep on task but that's part of the routine too, and Father Dumais periodically hollers or dashes downstairs to make sure he's getting dressed. Jim,

on a routine all his own, sleeps the morning away.

By 7 a.m., the household will have prepared lunch, made the beds, completed a brisk morning walk, conducted mass and sat down together for a breakfast of Cheerios, hard-boiled eggs, fruit, toast and juice. Another day is underway.

This is not your average family, and Father Dumais is not your average 71-year-old man. He spends each day, as he has for the last 33 years, caring for four men who aren't his children but may as well be. He's bestowed a dignified nickname—the Gents or, more formally, the Gentlemen—upon the group. Bill, a great helper around the home, is autistic and 54 years old. Kenny, 62, is developmentally delayed as well as nearly blind and increasingly deaf. Jimmy, 53, has Down syndrome. Jim, 54, though easily the most functional and autonomous of the four, still suffers from the effects of being placed at the age of 6 months in a state institution, where he stayed for 21 years until Father Dumais brought him under his wing.

All four men came to live with Father Dumais in 1974, when he opened his home to the handicapped in accordance with his Jesuit calling to care for those in need. Besides attending to

their basic needs, he was determined to give them a rich, full life: “I want them to not just be fed—I want them to dine in the evening,” he explains. Ever since, these five men have followed a strict daily routine that balances discipline with comfort, beauty with hard work. For the last three decades, this de facto Missoula family has helped one another and suffered through each other’s faults to make a life together. It’s not easy to capture this in quotes—particularly since the Gents are hard-pressed to carry on conversation—or to crack the subtleties of relationships that have evolved through time and co-dependence. But to spend a day with Father Dumais and the Gents is at once fascinating and endearing, exhausting and fulfilling, and somehow, it shows.

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At 5:30 a.m., Father Dumais opens his home and his life to a sleepy reporter, merely asking that she spend a full day with he and the residents before penning a story.

The home itself is a wonder. Behind a tall, dark fence near the University of Montana, the well-kept house glows, warm light streaming through its windows into a yard not yet touched by the dawn. The lawn, meticulously trimmed and set off by bright rows of daffodils and a blooming azalea, is rimmed by a stone path that leads to the front door. Behind the entrance are spotless rooms, simple but elegant, with walls painted in rich red or ocher and peppered with old family photographs and famous paintings that Father Dumais has replicated in his spare time. It’s a home that reflects Father Dumais’ pride in cleanliness, order and looks.



The same goes for its residents, who are busy getting themselves ready for the day. Jimmy’s clothes are in the dryer, since he insists on wearing the same ones every day and Father Dumais insists they be washed each morning. Bill, who speaks few words but wears a brilliant smile beneath a furrowed brow, is in the next room belting out songs in the bathtub. When Kenny comes up to the kitchen wearing his red sweat suit, he tips his head back so Father Dumais can put medicated eye drops in his eyes. But that’s not all the help Kenny gets.

“See here, Kenny,” Dumais says matter-of-factly. “You didn’t shave by your ear properly, and you didn’t shave under your nose properly. Run down and get the razor.”

Father Dumais is marked by his sharp sense of humor and high standards, both of which he applies to himself as eagerly as to others. A Canadian citizen raised near Vancouver, B.C., he has the well-spoken, fine-mannered conduct of a highly educated Jesuit, along with the no-nonsense demeanor of someone who’s single-handedly cared for four mentally disabled adults most of his life. He’s also dedicated himself to improving other aspects of the Missoula community, including more than three decades teaching French at Loyola Sacred Heart Catholic High School



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and his involvement as a founding member of the Poverello Center's board of directors. Besides that, he's a substitute pastor at Catholic parishes throughout Missoula and also officiates at weddings and funerals. In short, Father Dumais has found the energy to hold down a teaching career and his role as a community leader while still attending to the wide-ranging daily needs of the Gents and the home they share. Through it all, the Gents have remained Father Dumais' highest priority.

"You know, I've got calluses on my knees and I tell people, it's not from praying, it's from mopping up pee on the floor," he laughs.

And it's true. After the Gents are dressed and fed, he waits with them for the Opportunity Resources bus that comes to pick them up at the end of the driveway for work each weekday morning. Then Father Dumais sets to cleaning furiously, each room in turn. While he wipes down the kitchen's black counters and scrubs the upstairs and downstairs toilets by hand, he explains how this home—officially called Rockmont Inc.—came to

Father Dumais says he first heard about L'Arche homes while studying theology in Toronto as part of his 15 years of Jesuit training. L'Arche is an international movement that began in 1964 when Catholic priest Jean Vanier took two disabled men out of institutions and into his home in Troly-Breuil, France. The philosophy of L'Arche—"the ark" in French—is based on the notion that mentally disabled people ought to be integrated into families and society rather than isolated in institutions. Toward that end, L'Arche homes consist of "normal" people living and working through life alongside mentally handicapped people, a guiding notion that's drastically different from group homes that house disabled people who are tended by hired staff who don't live onsite.

"[The philosophy is] living and sharing your life with the handicapped people in the spirit of the Beatitudes," Father Dumais explains, referencing the advice Jesus gave to aspiring disciples as reflected in the Gospel of Matthew. "There's no 'we' and 'they'—we the people that help and they the people that receive help. We're sort of all in it together, and we form a community."

Since the '60s, L'Arche has spread to hundreds of communities throughout the world. When Father Dumais heard Vanier speak about L'Arche at his theology school, he says, he had no intention of modeling his own life after Vanier's philosophy.

“[Vanier] was talking about the handicapped people living with the normal people, and I just left there thinking this is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. How could this work? And so here I am,” he says wryly.

After being ordained a Jesuit in 1971, Father Dumais went to France to work on a master’s degree in French and began working as a chaplain to a L’Arche home in Paris and, later, Troly-Breuil. He had intended to return to Africa or India where he had previously done missionary work, but he decided instead, with the approval of his superior, to bring L’Arche to Montana. In 1973, he moved to Missoula because he thought it was a good size—40,000 at the time—for a L’Arche home. His initial intention was to launch a home and then return to missionary work in Africa, but after starting in Missoula he realized it would quickly fade without his committed presence.

“I realized that the structure had to be there and if the head person starts it and leaves, what happens to your structure?” he says. “I realized it wasn’t one of those things that you just start up and then duck out.”

Besides, he says, he came to a realization that one need not travel overseas to perform good deeds: “The Jesuits talk about peace and justice and doing work for people and that’s what made me want to go to Africa—I wanted to be with the people. But then I realized we’ve got all kinds of people right here in this city and so that’s why I stayed here.”

Officially, Father Dumais’ home is known as an adult foster care home, which is licensed by the state. He launched the home in 1974, at a time when state institutions in Montana and around the nation were beginning to deinstitutionalize people who’d long been kept in large hospitals for the mentally disabled. Montana’s state Boulder River School and Hospital brought eight mentally disabled people to meet Father Dumais, and Bill, Jim and two other older residents who have since passed away came to live with him. Kenny and Jimmy both joined the household later that year. Each of the residents pays Father Dumais for monthly room and board through their extended family members or government disability stipends, although their contributions don’t cover all the household costs. A board of directors helps to govern the home’s legal responsibilities and serves as an anchor of community support. Board President Julio Morales makes it clear, though, that Father Dumais is the one carrying the load: “When I say ‘we,’ I should say Father Dumais because he does all the work. Pure and simple, he is not human.”

Two years after he opened his home to the Gents, Father Dumais also launched a similar home for mentally handicapped women. That home, which he helped oversee but was largely operated by live-in female staff, ran successfully for 18 years, but closed in 1994 for lack of committed personnel. Both facilities were officially associated for about a dozen years with the international L’Arche organization, which has other homes in the Northwest, including Seattle and Tacoma, Wash., and Vancouver, B.C. But eventually, Father Dumais says, he dropped his formal affiliation with L’Arche because it required traveling to regular meetings to discuss L’Arche philosophy and the like, and Father Dumais found his time to be better spent living the life it prescribes, not theorizing about it.

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From its beginning, Father Dumais' home brought under one roof people with a wide range of disabilities. Jim came to the home after 21 years in Boulder River, where he was wrongly thought to be hydrocephalic, Father Dumais says. At first, Jim continued the behavior he exhibited in the institution—banging his head on the floors or walls and scratching himself—but gradually ceased doing that under Father Dumais' care. For years now, he's held down a job at St. Patrick Hospital washing dishes and is almost entirely independent. Unlike the other Gents, Jim doesn't follow Father Dumais' rigid routine. For a while, he even moved out of Father Dumais' house into his own apartment, but when he reverted to his troubled behavior Father Dumais let him move back in and Jim once again settled down. He doesn't need Father Dumais' strict supervision like the other Gents do, but he does need the companionship, the safe haven that Father Dumais' home offers.

"All he needs from us now is a place that's safe and he can be himself and he's fine," says Father Dumais. "That's all he needs from us and we give him that freedom."

While Jim keeps mainly to himself, he does sit down for a brief interview, where he apologizes for not being able to articulate much about his life. But then he says plenty, particularly that living with Father Dumais and the others is "sort of like being a family."

"You don't have to worry about being picked on or bullied," he says quietly, explaining how that's different from his experience at the institution. Here, he goes for bike rides in the afternoons and takes himself out for movies on the weekends.

Bill, who's autistic, was put into the Boulder institution at age 13 because his mother couldn't care for him any longer, Father Dumais says. Here, he's thrived on the household routine, and Father Dumais says he could probably run the house single-handedly. Besides assisting Father Dumais in many daily tasks, he also insists on doing the dishes, getting the mail and serving afternoon coffee. He rarely screeches and bangs his head like he used to, says Father Dumais, although he still predictably does it—for unknown reasons—when a tenor singer comes onto the radio. He frequently breaks into a wide smile but averts his face when you return it, and he often has a furrowed brow and mutters under his breath, appearing to be working out some conundrum in his head. Though he's not inclined to answer questions directly, when he leaves a room he can be heard breaking into loud and joyous singing before coming back, wearing a broad smile and falling silent once more.

Kenny lived much of his life in the Bitterroot with his parents, who came to Father Dumais 33 years ago when they grew too old to care for their son and asked for his help. Though developmentally delayed, Kenny can carry a conversation and holds down an Opportunity Resources job. Kenny's extremely poor vision and growing hearing loss augment his disabilities, Father Dumais says, particularly since he doesn't like to admit that he can't see and gets himself into trouble that way.

Jimmy, or Little Man, has Down syndrome and needs the most guidance from Father Dumais. That combined with his constant affection and cheery giggles makes him the darling of the family. After being institutionalized at a very young age and later living in an Eastern Montana

group home, he came to live with Father Dumais and the others. Although he's typically agreeable and best known for his standard one-liner: "Jimmy cute!" which he squeals with a smile while clapping his hands together, Father Dumais says he can also be a "stubborn little beast" when asked to do something he's not inclined to do. The daily routine of laundering Jimmy's outfit while he's in the bath is just one case of how Father Dumais has adapted to Jimmy's stubbornness.

"This cute facade is cute," he says. "But try to get him to do something he doesn't want to and there's no way!"



Like any set of siblings or longtime roommates, each of the Gents seems to fulfill a specific role in the household. Bill is the helper, the responsible one who takes charge of chores and silently helps Father Dumais day in and day out. Jimmy is the baby who sidles up with an adoring smile for an unprovoked hug and relishes attention from everyone. Kenny appears to fulfill the role of the middle child, often quiet and seeming a bit lost among the other Gents

because he manages fairly well on his own but isn't quite as handy as Bill. Jim, perhaps, is the oldest sibling, who largely occupies his own world and is nearly independent but still needs the warmth and security of the household to bolster his confidence for negotiating the outside world.

Father Dumais, of course, is the father. And a bit of the mother, since Little Man calls him "Buddy" or "Mommy." Father Dumais' face and tone reflect the same concern, pride, exhaustion and fulfillment found in biological parents, although he's carried on the work of caring for his dependents far longer than most natural parents.

"We feel like we're a family," he says, "but they're also adults and they're their own people and they know they have [biological] brothers and sisters and we remind them of that all the time."

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When the Gents and Father Dumais part ways during the weekdays, Kenny goes to work at the Opportunity Resources woodshop, and Bill goes to work at the Opportunity Resources production workshop where he performs tasks like folding towels and stuffing envelopes. Jimmy spends the day with the Opportunity Resources senior team, volunteering help for Meals on Wheels or doing social activities like bowling, and Jim goes off to wash dishes at the hospital. Father Dumais, meanwhile, teaches French as he has since 1973 at Loyola, where he's known for his exacting standards.

“I don’t know how he pulls it off,” says John Chamberlain, Opportunity Resources’ Choices Program coordinator. “He’s one of the most consistent persons I’ve ever met...It’s pretty fascinating that he’s created such a stable environment capable of supporting such diverse disabilities.”

Sheila Thompson, assistant director of residency services, says Opportunity Resources employs, houses and supports people with a range of mental and physical disabilities, and works with both group homes and adult foster care homes. Group homes, with rotating shifts of staff, each care for a number of residents but don’t have the personal, consistent atmosphere of a family home. And at the six foster care homes that Opportunity Resources contracts with, Thompson says, each family lives with only one disabled resident. Father Dumais’ home is independent but works with Opportunity Resources for the Gents’ employment, and Thompson says Father



Dumais’ commitment to the Gents is reflected in their abilities and good health.

“I feel they’ve been very fortunate to live in a home for so long and have such good care and stability,” she says. “I think that’s why they do so well.”

Besides Father Dumais’ ability to meet each of the Gents’ various needs consistently, there’s also the fact that he’s done it for so

long, and on his own.

Morales, board president of Dumais’ Rockmont home and a local lawyer says: “Most group homes require three different shifts of workers and have at least two people on board—but here he does it single-handedly. He provides the most incredible care for these folks. They have very enriched and fulfilled lives thanks to him. The problem is that we don’t have the ability to clone Father Dumais.”

That thought has no doubt crossed Father Dumais’ mind as well. The immaculate house, the well-dressed Gents who are healthy and happy, don’t just stumble into being every day.

“It all looks very easy but it gets kind of exasperating,” Father Dumais says. “In order to do a home for handicapped people, it requires energy and it requires time. It’s not hard work, but to keep it up is a constant challenge. It’s just a lot of wear and tear on yourself...It’s also very rewarding. To have Little Man in the morning, when you wake him up and he’s half asleep and he smiles and gives you a big hug—so there are rewards.”

But Father Dumais is not the 37-year-old he was when he first welcomed the Gents into his home.

“Yes, maybe Father seems like he has a lot of energy even though he’s 71, but he is 71,” he laughs. “So, you know, that’s an old man, whether I like to admit it or not.”

He talks realistically about plans for the not-too-distant future—he says his aim is to keep everything as is until he’s 75—when he won’t be able to keep up the demanding routine and will disband the home. Father Dumais’ ability to keep up isn’t the only factor: The Gents, too, are growing older and their needs are also changing. The Gents’ respective families, along with the home’s board of directors, will help Father Dumais make this transition when the time comes. That will be a major life event not just for the Gents, who’ve known Father Dumais’ care for so long, but also for the caretaker himself, who’s dedicated his life to helping these men.

“Eventually we are going to have to reevaluate because, you know, I’m getting old,” he says. “I don’t know how much longer I can do this. But I won’t drop it until I know everything will be fine.”

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At 3:45 p.m. the three Gents who work at Opportunity Resources tromp off the bus and back into Father Dumais’ home, where it’s everyone’s favorite time of day.

The afternoon ritual starts at 4 p.m., when Bill brews a pot of coffee and serves everyone a bright white cup and saucer where they’re gathered in the living room or, on sunny days, the back deck. Real cream and a pot full of honey sit in the middle of the table, while the Gents review their day with Father Dumais. After a busy day, smiles abound and everyone seems content to be relaxing at home. Perhaps it’s so enjoyable because it’s so fleeting: an hour later, Father Dumais abruptly says, “Well Gents, it’s 5 o’clock. Coffee time is over,” and Bill starts stacking up the coffee cups and takes them back into the kitchen.

After the coffee hour comes afternoon exercise. Jimmy, who doesn’t have the others’ endurance, takes a nap while Bill heads out on his own for a walk, Kenny makes a brisk lap walking solo around the University campus, and Father Dumais rides out on his bicycle.

Everyone returns at about 6 p.m., when Father Dumais starts cooking dinner. Tonight it’s sweet-and-sour chicken with rice, steamed green beans, and tomato soup, followed by a dessert of mincemeat tarts and green tea. Bill sets the table while Father Dumais cooks. When he opened the home, Father Dumais says he only knew how to cook a few items: hamburgers, meatloaf and variations thereof.

“I thought, this is really going to get boring,” Father Dumais says, explaining how he took courses in cooking from local chefs to improve his menu. Today, Father Dumais is known for his excellent meals. In fact, to bridge the gap between the monthly contributions that each of the Gents makes to the household and the actual cost of running it, he hosts elegant dinners for parties looking to enjoy fine dining while donating to a good cause. He offers these dinners about once a month, welcoming groups of up to 12 for \$50 a head, though guests often make more

generous donations. To support Missoula's Catholic schools, he also auctions off one of his full-service dinners at their annual fund-raiser; in 2005 the winning bid was \$6,000.

After the first course of tomato soup, Kenny clears the bowls and we start in on the main course. Then we're treated to a small taste of Jimmy's stubbornness, which is matched only by Father Dumais' tenacity. Sitting at the beautifully set, broad table with a brimming vase of daffodils cut from the yard as a centerpiece, Jimmy lets loose a great hiccup. Father Dumais quickly says, "Excuse me," looking across the table at Jimmy to echo the nicety. Silently, Jimmy tucks his head down into his plate and eats faster.

"Excuse me," Father Dumais repeats, this time in a lower and slower tone.

No answer, but Jimmy starts slurping louder.

Excuse me. Excuse me. Excuse me," Father Dumais chants sternly.

Still no response.

Then Father Dumais changes tactics, shifting into a soft singsong tone but still not relenting in his aim to see Jimmy's manners on display. After Father Dumais gives his pestering a brief break, still looking intently across the table at a defiant Jimmy, suddenly Jimmy relents, murmuring a quiet "Excuse me." That wins a pleased smile and complimentary words from Father Dumais, and as the brief tension lifts from the table, conversation returns.

After dinner, Bill and Kenny begin to clear the dishes. Dusk is settling outside and another day's routine is drawing full circle. After dishes are done, Father Dumais will take care of some work in his office, while Kenny and Jimmy will head downstairs to their respective rooms to watch a movie or tune in to the radio. Bill will retreat upstairs, where he listens to the Village People or another album from his vast collection through headphones, and sings along. By 10, the whole household will retire in anticipation of 5:20 a.m., when Kenny wakes the household each morning.

On weekends, the routine is more relaxed. The Gents can sleep in, stay up as late as they want, and the whole group often goes out to the Mustard Seed or Finn and Porter for a nice dinner. It's also, Father Dumais adds with a sparkling smile, the time for deep cleaning around the home. Every few months, the routine is further amended for an overnight vacation to Spokane, where the Gents can spend their savings from work. And once a year, the group embarks on a longer summer break, spending a week or so in Vancouver or Seattle for a change of scenery. Then it's back to the routine that has helped Father Dumais' home run so smoothly for the last 33 years.

"So we go to bed and there you are," Father Dumais says contentedly, laying down his napkin at the dinner table. "Then we wake up and do it all again, and that's the way it is."

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Father Dumais has a clear idea of what he's accomplishing here. On the surface he's helping to bring stability into the Gents' lives, reminding Jimmy of his manners, making sure Kenny's got his eye drops and Bill's finished the dishes. But there's more to it.

"We read the scriptures, and what was it all about?" he asks. "It was about doing for others, for others who can't do for themselves...I tell my students, there is so much to do, but each one of us can do our little bit. Let us say that it has changed the lives of six people or 12 people or whatever—at least it's happening. And I think that's really important."

There is no doubt that Father Dumais is, as he says, doing his little bit toward transforming lives. The raw compassion and sacred ambition that he acted upon years ago has managed to bring five different lives and five very different sets of needs under one roof, to the betterment of all. And while it has certainly changed the Gents' lives, it's changed his, too.

"I've lived with these people longer than anyone else," Father Dumais reflected during a quiet moment in the day.

Bill, Jimmy and Jim may not be able to articulate their sense of belonging, or their roles as members in a real home and how it's different from the institutionalized lives they once knew. But it shows in their faces, in Bill's secret, melodic songs that echo from the other room while he's refilling the coffee pot. It shows in Jimmy's tight hugs, and in Jim's return to the comfort of the household even though he may be able to make it out there on his own. During the afternoon walk, though, Kenny did have a few things to say about living with Father Dumais, which he offered up unprovoked amid our conversation.



"He does everything for us—he's almost like family," Kenny said in his soft voice as we lapped the university campus. "He makes sure everybody is dressed right. He makes sure we make our beds...He's a pretty nice guy."

That just might be the understatement of a lifetime.