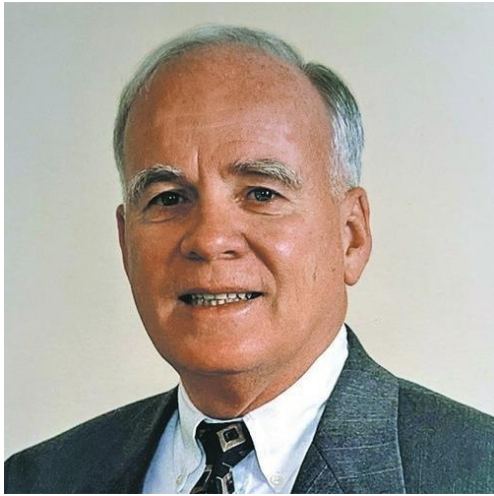


Donald Thomas McNelis Obituary



It is with profound sorrow that we share the passing of Markham, Virginia, resident Dr. Donald Thomas McNelis, the sixth president of St. Thomas Aquinas College. He departed this life peacefully on August 13, 2024, at Delray Medical Center in Delray Beach, Florida. In his final moments, he was surrounded by Romaine, his devoted wife of 54 years, John, his loving son, and Avery Leigh and Megan Riley, his adoring granddaughters.

Born on September 26, 1932, in Plymouth, Pennsylvania, he was the fourth son of John Thomas McNelis and Margaret Young McNelis. His father was a conductor on the Delaware Lackawanna Western Railway, and his

mother was a teacher and homemaker.

He was preceded in death by his parents and his three brothers, Dr. John, Dr. Robert, and James McNelis. Additionally, he was preceded in death by his two infant children, Donald Thomas II and Mary Margaret. He is survived by extended family.

Donald T. McNelis will be remembered not only for his remarkable leadership and contributions to St. Thomas Aquinas College but also for the enduring love and legacy he leaves with his family. He was an amazing son, brother, husband, father, grandfather, uncle, and friend. He was a kind and generous man with a compassionate heart. He served as a teacher, administrator, foreign service officer, and college president. A graduate of Kingston High School (PA), Dr. McNelis received his Bachelor's degree from Bloomsburg University and his Master's as well as his Doctorate from George Washington University. He did postdoctoral work at the Foreign Services Institute of the US Department of State, Boston University, and Columbia University. Dr. McNelis had a wide variety of experiences. After a stint as a cryptographer with the US Army, stationed at The Pentagon, he worked for the US State Department as an education advisor stationed in Ethiopia. In 1966 Dr. McNelis left government service and accepted a position as Dean of Instruction at Hagerstown Junior College (MD). Subsequently, he held teaching/administrative positions at the College of Steubenville (OH) and Lock Haven State College (PA) before joining the faculty/administration at St. Thomas Aquinas College (NY) as Professor and Academic Dean in 1970. He served in that position until 1974, when he was selected as the 6th President of the College. Dr. McNelis was the first lay President under the founding Dominican Sisters. He held this position for twenty-one years (1974-1995) when he was named President Emeritus. Dr. McNelis dedicated his life to St. Thomas Aquinas College (STAC) and STAC's good health for 25 years. Dr. McNelis was synonymous with STAC. During his stewardship, the college not only received national recognition but doubled in size, both in enrollment and physical space. One of his most notable accomplishments was achieving 21 consecutive years of balanced budgets. In 1988-89 he was on professional leave from STAC as a Senior Fellow with the Council of Independent Colleges in Washington, DC. He was particularly heartened by the national recognition that STAC received, including several strong national rankings by Money Magazine. He said, "We discovered the operative formula in the early

years of my involvement at STAC. If we provide quality education at an affordable cost, in a caring, embracing environment, on a beautiful state-of-the-art campus, the students will seek us out." In 1998, he was awarded a Doctor of Humane Letters Degree from STAC. Following his retirement, he served as a higher education consultant for a variety of colleges/universities throughout the country, including serving as Vice President of Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty at Marymount College in Tarrytown, NY. During his long career, Dr. McNelis accumulated regional and national activities, including being a member of the Council of Presidents of the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics; a Trustee of the Council of Independent College and Universities; a Board Member of the Council for the Advancement of Small Colleges; a member of The Registry for retired college presidents; a member of the New York State Senate Advisory Committee on Higher Education; a Trustee, College of Mount Saint Vincent (NY); a member of the Board of Directors of ROMIC; a Director with the Rockland County Housing Action Coalition and the Rockland County Bioscience Park Corp. He served as President of the Associated Colleges of the Mid-Hudson area, a founding Board Member of Junior Achievement of Rockland; and President of Rockland County/St. Lucia Partners of America; an 18-year Board Member of Rockland Economic Development Committee (REDC), chairing its 1998- 2008 Task Force on Economic Growth, as well as serving as co-chair of REDC Forty Under 40 Program for a number of years. For 27 years, he was a Director of Provident (NY) Bank, having initially served as Director of Union Saving Bank of Mamaroneck (NY) for five years. He also was a member of Rockland Country Club, the former Lions Club of Valley Cottage, and the American Legion. In every action, he exemplified what it means to live a life of purpose, guided by a profound sense of empathy and a deep-seated desire to uplift and inspire. His legacy is not merely one of kind deeds but of a life richly lived, one where the happiness of others was his greatest reward.

A mass of Christian Burial was held Thursday, September 5, 2024, at St. John The Baptist Roman Catholic Church, Front Royal, Virginia. The interment will be private at Gate of Heaven Cemetery Silver Spring, Maryland. A special Memorial service will be held at St. Thomas Aquinas College.

Contributions can be made in Dr. McNelis's memory to St. Thomas Aquinas College, Route 340, Sparkhill, New York 10976, St. John The Baptist Roman Catholic Church, 120 West Main Street, Front Royal Virginia 22630, or to the [charity of your choice](#).

To plant trees in memory, please visit the [Sympathy Store](#).

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