

Sheriff Wally George Law Enforcement from the Heart

By Vicki Hodder

Saline County Sheriff Wally George starts his workday at the fax machine. After compiling a log of sheriff office activities for the last 24 hours, Sheriff George faxes it out to five local radio and newspaper offices. Sheriff George includes everything: burglaries, traffic accidents, cattle that had to be moved from the road. The media, after all, are an important conduit to the Saline County residents who elected him, Sheriff George believes.

"I am totally, 100 percent open to the folks who put me here," Sheriff George said. "They need to know what I'm doing." In a sense, that simple morning task is at the heart of Sheriff George's lengthy tenure as sheriff of the county in which he grew up.



Sheriff George, 63, has served as county sheriff for nearly 30 years, longer than any other sheriff in Missouri. During his decades as sheriff, Sheriff George has seen his post as more of a calling than a job, an opportunity to care for Saline County residents that requires openness and reliable communication.

Bringing service home

Sheriff George grew up in Slater, Mo., a tiny city about a dozen miles from Saline's county seat, Marshall. The second eldest of eight children, Sheriff George left his home county only for a tour of duty in the U.S. Navy between 1963 and 1966.

Sheriff George served as a gunner on the USS Maddox, famous for its role in the Gulf of Tonkin incident that launched the Vietnam conflict.

Sheriff George remembers well the fear and tension he felt as he fired nonstop at the three North Vietnamese torpedo boats engaged with the Maddox. Though the destroyer wasn't sinking, it felt that way to the 19-year-old. "I truly thought I was going to die," Sheriff George said. "It's just a horrible experience."

Honorably discharged in 1966, Sheriff George came back to Saline County and worked for a construction company while waiting for an opening in the law enforcement field. He found a job in 1968 as a patrolman with the Slater Police Department and then signed on as a radio dispatcher with the Saline County Sheriff's Office in January 1970. He became a Saline County deputy sheriff in 1972 and then chief deputy in 1975.

When then-Saline County Sheriff Henry Hoff died in 1979, George stepped into the acting sheriff's position. A month later, he won through a special election the Saline County Sheriff's post which he has held ever since.

Much has changed while Sheriff George has been at the helm of Saline County's primary law enforcement agency. Sheriff George's staff is six times larger than it was in 1979; the sheriff's office no longer closes during the graveyard shift; a new building now houses the sheriff's office.

But Sheriff George has kept an appreciation for the value of human life as the cornerstone of his law enforcement career throughout the years.

Taking care of "his people"

For prisoners housed in the Saline County Jail, Sheriff George's philosophical foundation shows up in small ways. Meals, for example. Rather than skirting the edges of allowable calorie counts, Sheriff George makes sure jail inmates receive three freshly cooked meals each day. Meals are not just inexpensive, but filling and nutritious. A typical lunch might include pork chops, green beans, potato casserole, rolls and angel food cake for dessert.

Sheriff George also ensures that prisoners who have something to tell him are able to communicate. Guards transmit notes to Sheriff George and he makes sure to answer them all. "I'll always reply to the inmates, because I want them to know that they're not just thrown in a cell and forgotten about," Sheriff George said. "They're human beings and they deserve to be answered. There are people who view people behind bars as a little less than human. I respectfully disagree with that," he said.

Sheriff George's wife, C.J., said the longtime sheriff's compassion has earned him the regard of those he has imprisoned. The Georges re-

ceive Christmas cards from lifetime prison inmates who remember the good treatment they received while at the Saline County jail, said C.J. George, a Missouri associate circuit court clerk. "He treats people as they should be treated, whether they be inmates or the neighbors or someone who comes in with a problem," C.J. George said. "They should all be treated with respect."

For his constituents, Sheriff George's beliefs mean he responds to calls of any sort as he strives to take care of "his people." Sheriff George recently spoke of an older woman who called to say she needed to speak to "Wally," as residents commonly refer to their longtime sheriff. Sheriff George got on the line and could only get the woman to say that she needed him to come to her house in Marshall. He did. The woman showed Sheriff George a leaky faucet and said she didn't know what to do. Sheriff George quickly made the small repair, relishing the sense of closeness that prompted the woman to call upon him for help. "That meant a hell of a lot to me," Sheriff George said.

It means a lot to Saline County residents, as well. All Sheriff George needs to run his campaign is the slogan "Re-elect Wally Sheriff" and some mugs and posters sporting a caricature of his eyes, nose and trademark mustache. County residents have unfailingly responded, electing Sheriff George to another four-year term, most recently this past November.

Lending a helping hand

Sheriffs in other counties consider Sheriff George the essence of a public servant. Sheriff George's years of experience make him a great resource to new as well as experienced sheriffs, always there to lend a helping hand with unfailing good nature, several sheriffs said. The sort of sheriff, said former Cooper County Sheriff Paul Milne, who you can count on to return your telephone call if you try to reach him when he's not in. "He's the kind of guy you're always comfortable around," said Milne, who retired at the end of last year. "Seems like he's never in a bad mood; I'm sure he's had his days, but I've never seen them."

Lafayette County Sheriff Kerrick Alumbaugh, who first took office in 2001, recalled Sheriff George's advice to him when he was "green as a gourd" and uncertain how to handle an administrative



Sheriff George and his wife, C.J.



Sheriff George introduces his dog, Alex, to a group of children in the early 1990's.

controversy. Sheriff George told Sheriff Alumbaugh that as sheriff he owed his service to Lafayette County residents, rather than to those who held greater authority—an insight that guided Sheriff Alumbaugh through the dispute.

And, when a headless, handless body was found in Lafayette County last spring, Sheriff Alumbaugh knew Sheriff George would do whatever he could to help unravel the matter. Knowing he could count on additional resources if necessary is of

immense importance, Sheriff Alumbaugh said. That's the way Sheriff George is, Sheriff Alumbaugh said. "If you go in and see him and you've got a problem—now he's got a problem."

Dubbing Sheriff George an "icon," Ray County Sheriff Samuel Clemens also cited Sheriff George's willingness to help anyone in need. Sheriff George treats everyone the same, Sheriff Clemens said; everybody receives the same caring attention.

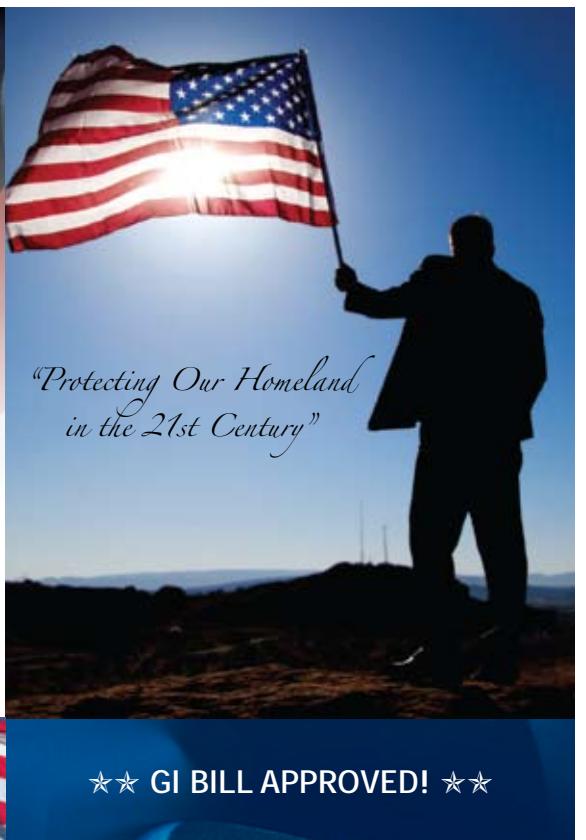
Indeed, C.J. George said people find their way to the couple's home as well as the office to appeal to the sheriff's caring nature. Relatives of someone who has been arrested will arrive on the Georges' doorstep to ask why or a person in need will be at the door seeking help, she said. "People come with all manners of questions and it's always, 'Wally, can you help?'" C.J. George said. "It's just part of who we are, I suppose."

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