

Islander retires from high sheriff position

By Sam Bari

Jamestown resident Joe Ford retired recently from his stint as Newport County Sheriff.

He served seven years of a 10-year appointment as the county's sheriff and has worked for the state in a number of capacities for 32 years.

Ford explained his duties as sheriff.

"The sheriff's department works for the court," Ford explained. "We serve warrants, summons, and other court papers, and execute evictions. We also protect the judges and the courtrooms."

He said that sheriffs are responsible for transporting prisoners, and they are often required to go out of town to pick up prisoners in another state, or deliver prisoners to out of state destinations. When departments are shorthanded, these tasks are backlogged. Court papers are not served, prisoners cannot be transported, and courtrooms do not have the security they should have.

It's likely, Ford said, that his position will not be replaced due to the hard economic times.

"The economy is failing and the state can't afford to replace people who are retiring," Ford said. "The sheriffs in Providence and Washington Counties were not replaced when they retired, and I doubt that I will be." He said that the lack of service has got to be felt, especially by the courts.

Ford said that when the economy is bad, and people are not working, crime increases. "If people don't have the money to buy things they

need, they steal them," he said. "And that increases the burden on the court system."

According to Ford, the lack of services by the sheriff's departments due to fewer officers affects the counties in a number of ways. He said that not everybody understands the differences between the responsibilities of the sheriff's department and those of the police department.

When Ford was appointed to the Newport County high sheriff's position by Governor Lincoln Almond in 2001, he was given the freedom to change department policies and make improvements in the way the sheriff's department provided services.

Ford said that he would like to be remembered by the officers who worked for him as "the sheriff that worked with them. I want people to remember that I led by example. I went to work every day, and every day I worked. I didn't spend my time as sheriff sitting in an office."

If a sheriff's deputy was needed in a courtroom and the department was shorthanded, Ford said he did not call in an off-duty officer. He took care of the courtroom duty himself. If a prisoner had to be transported or picked up, he had no problem going. He said that just because he was sheriff did not mean he did not work when work needed to be done.

"A lot of sheriffs don't wear uniforms. I did. When I was in uniform, I worked the same as any other officer," Ford said.

The only time Ford did not wear

a uniform was when he served papers. He tried not to embarrass people. "Just because a person is served a subpoena does not mean he is guilty," Ford said.

Ford made a practice of calling people before he would serve papers and arrange to meet them so he could discreetly make the delivery. He said that he told every one of them that as long as they showed up as agreed everything would be all right. He also told them that if they decided not to meet him, he would find them and they would be taken to court or jail in handcuffs as the situation demanded.

Ford said that he enjoyed his 21 years with the sheriff's department and liked going to work every day. "The only part of my job I didn't like was evictions," Ford said. "Evicting families from their homes was never a pleasant task."

The department changed some during his tenure due to the improvements in technology. "We now have computers, but the system isn't adequate," Ford said. The department could run more efficiently and safely if it had access to other law enforcement agencies and their information, he said. Ford attributed the lack of up-to-date technology to funding. "There just never was enough money to give the department the equipment it needed," Ford explained.

Ford began his career in law enforcement working as the Jamestown Police Department dispatcher in the early 1970s before he was married. "There weren't any openings in the department at the time"

Ford said. "This was back when Chief Tighe was a patrolman."

He heard about an opening at the Adult Correctional Institutions in Cranston after working in Jamestown for two years, and applied for a job as a guard. He worked at the prison for 11 years starting on Aug. 31, 1976. During that time, Ford married his wife of nearly 30 years, Regina, and they had two children.

Then a position with the Newport County Sheriff's Department became available and Ford signed on as a sheriff's deputy. He was a deputy for 12 years before being promoted to acting high sheriff for two-years in 1999. During that time, he and his wife had two more children.

He said he was glad when the job at the sheriff's department opened up because the job at the prison could be dangerous and he was hurt a couple of times. He had 99 prisoners in his cellblock that he guarded by himself. He said that some of them were high profile prisoners of notoriety at the time.

"I had all the heavies, Jerry and John Ouimette, Chucky Flynn, and Rudy Sciarra, they were all in my block. They were in for everything from murder to you name it. Mostly mob activities," Ford said. "I got hurt a couple of times. An inmate threw me down a set of stairs and I hurt my back. I was out of work for eight months."

After two years as acting high sheriff, Ford gathered letters of recommendation from 18 judges and a handful of letters from vari-

ous police chiefs and sent them to Providence with his application for the official sheriff's position. Governor Almond awarded him a 10-year appointment as High Sheriff of Newport County, a position he held for 7 years before deciding to retire.

Sheriff Joseph Ford, 59, retired on August 31, 2008, 32-years to the day from when he began working for the state at the Cranston ACI.

Ford was born in Providence and lived in Newport until moving with his family to Jamestown when he turned nine. He eventually bought a house on Stern Street when he got married and has never moved from the island since. The Fords built the house they live in today when their family grew.

Ford's son, Joe Jr., 29, works for the Town of Jamestown, and lives in Coventry with his wife, Emily, and their son, Ethan, who turns one this month. Ford's oldest daughter Heidi, 28, earned her degree from the University of Rhode Island works as a physical therapist. She lives with her husband Matt O'Brady in Cranston.

Ford's younger son Keith, 24, is a dispatcher with the Jamestown Police Department and his sister Brittany, 23, is a banker in Narragansett. They live at home with Ford and his wife.

Now that he's retired, Ford spends his time working on his house that he claims to have neglected for the entire time he was sheriff, and he plays with his grandson who he says is the highlight of his life.

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