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Devlin Rose Up the Ranks, Has Sheriff's Endorsement

MILFORD

It was a smokey fire on Cliff Street in Oneonta the afternoon of March 3, 1992.

"I saw the color of the smoke change," said Richard J. Devlin Jr., then a patrolman on the Oneonta city force, now a candidate for Otsego County sheriff. "I knew something was going to happen."

A three-firefighter team searching the house was alerted: Get out of the building. A "flashover" followed, filling the room the firemen were searching with flames.

Firefighter Jim Sawyer fell in the doorway on his way out and was engulfed in fire.

"Devlin reacted instantaneously and ran to rescue the downed fireman," the citation the officer later received reported. "With complete disregard for his own safety, (he) reached under the outflowing flames and grabbed Sawyer."

With another fireman helping, "we got Jimmy by the arms," said Devlin, "and pulled him out."

The threatened firefighter was safe, although parts of his face suffered third-degree burns.

For his actions that day, Devlin, 44, received the Oneonta Police Department's Life Saving Award and the Federation of Police Officers' similar award.

But those are just two of many awards that pepper his resume, from Eagle Scout, to Army marksmanship citations, to commendations from the state police and Oneonta police, and, most recently, for outstanding DWI enforcement efforts while with the sheriff's department.

Devlin, third in command at The Meadows' headquarters, was endorsed by the Republican County Committee in May to replace Sheriff Donald R. Mundy. The undersheriff, Bruce Carroll, also announced he's retiring. Devlin was challenged for the nomination by Kenneth W. "Skip" Beijen, a retired state trooper from Oneonta.

The two men face off in a primary Tuesday, Sept. 12.

Born in Englewood, N.J., on April 22, 1962, young Rich moved to Milford with his family. His father, Richard Sr., who had been accidentally shot by a fellow officer and lost an arm, founded Fargo Overland Protective Services Inc., still run by the family today.

The son graduated from Cooperstown High School in 1980, then graduated with honors from the Otsego Area Occupational Center in Agricultural Mechanics before joining the MPs. The training included 6-8 weeks of bootcamp, followed by 12 weeks of MP school, where recruits learned all the basics: Self-defense, how to make arrests, how to use a handgun and so on. He was assigned to the 61st Military Police Company in Hanau, West Germany, where he was involved in security operations around NATO facilities.

It was there he met his wife, Laurie, who was also an MP. The couple has been married for 22 years and have three children, Richard, 21, Kimberly, 18 and Ros, 16.

Honorably discharged, he joined the family business as director of operations, but always felt drawn to police work.

"When I was young -- cops are a tight-knit group," he recalled in a recent interview. "Officers were always stopping by the house."

When he was 7 or 8, his sister had a seizure, and he was impressed by the officers' professional conduct while spiriting her to a nearby hospital.

During the '80s, he started taking Civil Service tests for Cooperstown and SUNY Oneonta, and accepted the offer from Oneonta police.

Action soon followed, with a husband holding his wife and child hostage on Union Street.

"We made the decision: We had to go in," said Devlin, "and get those people out."

The man with the gun ended up shooting himself, but the episode -- as would the Cliff Street fire rescue -- emphasized for him the importance of training: often, officers have "only a second"

to decide on life-and-death situations. Because of training, "you won't see a police officer or a firefighter not running to the aid of anyone."

Oneonta had a 20-year retirement plan, which Devlin found attractive, but he never had a weekend off, which -- as a young father of three -- bothered him. So when he had the chance to join the sheriff's department in 1992 -- the rotating schedule gave deputies three weekends off in a row -- he jumped at it.

In Oneonta, Devlin had worked patrol. In the sheriff's department, he was soon involved in corrections -- there are 35 guards in the department overseeing a maximum of 75 inmates -- and civil law, such as pistol permits and evictions, as well as road patrol.

The sheriff brought him along, Devlin said, promoting him to sergeant in 2000. Mundy knew what he wanted, the deputy said, "but the sheriff's the kind of sheriff who will listen to you."

The candidate has seen local crime evolve over the course of his career. There used to be one "domestic" a weekend; now there's one a night. Youthful mischief is up. And drugs are heavier: Marijuana used to be it; now, there's cocaine in the county, an occasional crystal meth lab is busted, and there's "a little bit of heroin coming back."

Looking ahead, the candidate wants the department to be more "community oriented." Right now, there are no patrols between 2 and 6 a.m. Devlin wants to fill that gap. If a situation is serious enough for a member of the public to call and ask for help, "they deserve to have a police officer respond," he said; sometimes, the dispatchers have to say everyone's busy.

Right now, computers are being installed in all the department's cruisers, to allow officers to process paperwork in the field.

Why should Republican voters select him over his opponent?

First, he said, he knows the department, and has been endorsed by both unions -- the unit representing the deputies, and the one representing the guards -- and by Mundy and the undersheriff.

"The fact that I've been here 15 years" should be in his favor, he said, adding, "for the most part, I'm doing the job now. I have the respect and backing of employees here..."

"I'm a down-to-earth guy. I do my job. I'd like to be the next sheriff and I think I'll do a fine job."

