

St. Maries chief hangs up the badge



St. Maries Police Chief Fred Cruzan retires at the end of the month. He's been serving on the force since 1988 and has been chief for 12 years. - Mary Truman

By Mary Truman

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A bar fight got him here. A heart attack will take him out.

Fred Cruzan has served with the St. Maries Police Department for 21 years, first as a patrol sergeant, and then spent the last 12 years as chief of police. He will retire this week.

A retirement party is planned from 2 to 4:30 p.m. Dec. 10.

"After being here for almost 22 years, I've gotten very, very close to this community," Chief Cruzan said. "I want to thank the community for their trust and confidence in allowing me to serve them. It's truly been an honor."

Chief Cruzan began his career in law enforcement shortly after he was involved in a bar fight in the city of Osburn, Idaho.

"It's not something I am really proud of," he said. "I was sitting in a bar and somebody threw a glass at me and I felt I needed to defend myself, which I did. I was offered a job by an off-duty chief who was in the bar at the time."

The chief suggested he come to the station and fill out an application. Mr. Cruzan served part time with that department for two years before he was offered a full-time position with the St. Maries Police.

In addition to his position on the police force, Chief Cruzan serves in the Army National Guard, as president of the car club, president of the Benewah County Child Abuse Task Force, community representative for the Foreign Exchange Program, and on the Keeping Children Safe panel advisory board for the Health and Welfare Department.

"At my wife's 20th class reunion I was voted "most changed", and I wasn't even in her class," Chief Cruzan said.

Stress has taken its toll on his body and now the chief said he must say good-bye.

"I had a heart attack in April, which my doctor said was due to an overwhelming amount of stress," Chief Cruzan said.

The heart attack came after his wife was diagnosed with stage-three inflammatory breast cancer and was told there was an 85 percent chance that she would not live through it.

"I was involved in too many things," he said. "Trying to deal with my wife's illness on top of everything else was just too much."

He said his doctor suggested a career change.

The public is not aware of how a police officer's job affects their personal lives, Chief Cruzan said.

"I can't count the times I came home at night and cried because I just came from a child abuse call or a home where a husband got drunk and beat up his wife and kids," he said. "You see the very worst side of society and sometimes it's hard to deal with."

His advice to those considering a career in law enforcement is, "Run."

"It is a thankless job," he said. "If you are going to do it make sure you get into it for the right reason."

Chief Cruzan likens a career in law enforcement to a double-edged sword.

"On one side an officer on the street sacrifices a lot for his community," he said. "We give up a lot of our freedoms and it's very difficult on our families. The stress is enormous because of the nature of our business and it affects your health. But on the other side when you look into the eyes of a child or a person that's been a victim of a violent crime and they say "Thank You" then it's payday."

Another challenge Chief Cruzan and his officers face is fairness and objectivity. Because St. Maries is a small town, the officers know many members of the community personally.

"Sometimes when they make mistakes it is hard to do my job without letting my personal feelings cloud my judgment," he said.

A future challenge for the police department will come if the city decides to contract with Benewah County law enforcement. Chief Cruzan said he believes the success of the idea depends on the management, but has reservations.

"We have done it before and under the right administration it works well," he said. "If the sheriff doesn't have the department's best interest in mind it doesn't work. Last time with Sheriff Rodney Thormahlen we were treated equally, but after he left there were problems."

Chief Cruzan said he believes contracting with the county could affect the officer response time for St. Maries residents.

"I believe the city of St. Maries, due to the fact that it is the county seat and largest town, the citizens deserve their own police department," he said.

Chief Cruzan said he is proud of the progress that officers have made in his department.

"I've seen a lot of officers come and go," he said. "I take great pride in the quality of the training I provide my officers. I measure that quality by how long they stay here. They usually get hired pretty quickly by larger agencies that have high standards."

The exception is Lieutenant Robert (Bob) Loe, who has been with the St. Maries department for a long time and used to work for the Benewah County Sheriff's Department, Chief Cruzan said.

The chief's last day of work is Dec. 10. Lt. Loe will act as chief until the next chief is

appointed. He has also expressed interest in the position, Chief Cruzan said.

"Bob has training and qualifications, is easygoing and easy to work with," he said. "It all depends on what the city council and the mayor wants."

Mayor Robert Allen said the decision will be made by the new mayor and council.