

Making it over the finish line: Bill Steven shares memories of 32 years at DNSO

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When Bill Steven gave his final radio call as undersheriff May 22, his “1010,” he gave a long list of people who helped “keep him straight” through his 32 years with the Del Norte County Sheriff’s Office. At the top of his list of supporters was his wife, Alania.

“I just wanted to thank everybody who got me over the finish line over the years, over the decades,” Steven said. “But she was that rock that was with me for this whole journey and I couldn’t have done it without her.”

As is tradition, the dispatcher then read off over the radio a long list of career accomplishments by Steven, obviously choking back emotions. The recording can be viewed on the DNCS’s Facebook page. Steven said he actually gets kidded a lot by others who ask what hasn’t he done at the sheriff’s office?

“I tell people I never played with bombs, or suspected bombs, and I never had a dog,” Steven said, referring to the canine unit.

Other than that, Steven's name is just associated with some of the biggest events in Del Norte history.

A native of Crescent City, Steven split his time growing up between here and the family ranch in Big Flat (located out in the boonies near Hiouchi). Steven got out of town after high school for a three-year stint in the U.S. Army, then returned home. He used veterans benefits to put himself through the police academy and was hired on by Sheriff Mike Ross in February 1988.

He quickly progressed from working as a bailiff at the jail, to boating safety and patrolman. Then his career took a swerve.

"By the summer of 1990, I was growing my hair out and my beard long for the drug taskforce for quite a few years," Steven said. "The only downside to drug enforcement, there were a lot of 2 a.m. calls and my wife didn't care for that. We got married in that period. My wedding pictures are of me with this big red beard down to here (motioning halfway down his chest) and hair halfway down my back."

During his four years on the drug task force, Steven set a Del Norte County cash seizure record of \$540,000 that stands to this day.

After 1994, Steven handled regular detective work and actually caught a bank robber. "That was kind of a cool case. He had a funny name – Harley Ray Davidson," Steven recalled. He also helped solve a cold case murder case.

In 1995, Steven was promoted to sergeant and worked at the jail for a while. In 2001, Steven was again promoted to detective sergeant and started working general and serious crimes, like sexual assaults and murders.

"Most cops who've been up through the ranks like me will tell you it's fun being a detective. When you're the guy in charge of the detectives and you're working the important cases, the high profile cases, the murders, the child molesters, you just get a lot of satisfaction out of working those cases, seeing them through to the end and sending people to prison for long time," Steven said.

Steven then took the administrative leadership position of commander and finished out his career as undersheriff, working with Sheriff Erik Apperson who joked he was none too pleased to see him go.

"I was very fortunate that I inherited Bill in his position and had instant access to him," Apperson said. "That made my transition into being sheriff so much easier because I was able to pry out all that institutional knowledge he's had and gained over the years.

But, about five or six years ago, Steven set his career limit at age 55.

"I just decided when I hit the double five, that was enough, and stuck to it," Steven said. He is still work as retired annuitant, though, assisting with some administrative tasks. He also hopes to be more involved in as a local volunteer firefighter, something he's done since 2008.

Steven's career accomplishments include international goodwill, as well, leading to the sister city relationship between Rikuzentakata, Japan, and Crescent City.

Many know how a boat from Takata High School in Rikuzentakata was swept away to sea after the 2011 eastern Japan earthquake and how the subsequent tsunami destroyed the Crescent City Harbor. What most don't know, Steven said, was the boat sat in the sheriff's office back parking lot for months after being hauled away from South Beach.

"After they confirmed it was from Takata High School, where more than 20 students and a couple teachers died, I knew they really wanted it back for deep, spiritual reasons. But nobody was lifting a finger to do it," he said.

So, he volunteered to spearhead its return.

How he accomplished that is a long story, but the short version is that he recruited his son and other high school kids. Eventually a number of other partners stepped up and Steven and the students traveled to Japan to officially present the boat.

"So, I went over there with my son and these five or six kids. They treated those kids like they were rock stars for a week," Steven recalled. "All that led to the development of a sister city relationship between Rikuzentakata and Crescent City."

Of all his biggest career accomplishments, Steven said that \$500,000 drug seizure and solving the cold case were pretty good. But they pale in comparison to his little idea that blossomed into international good will.

"They're both cop stories with pretty depressing undertones. This story was the happy story I get to tell people," Steven said. "I was at the right place at the right time to come up with the right idea from my living room that eventually led to a sister city agreement. I get to pack that around with me for the rest of my life and that feels pretty good."