

Sgt. McManus signs off; he gives a candid glimpse into life of a deputy sheriff

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On Feb. 21, the Del Norte Sheriff's Office posted a video to its Facebook page that came with a viewer's warning — "This video may cause you to get sand in your eyes."

It was a dare to watch a recording of Sgt. Gene McManus signing off at the end of his last shift after 32.7 years at the DNSO without it bringing a tear to your eye. It most certainly brought one to McManus's eye as the dispatcher acknowledged his farewell.

"That was hard, really, really hard," McManus said. "I love what I do. I learned as I got older, there's some stuff physically I can't do anymore. Foot pursuits are really hard.

"All my children have paid the price for me being a cop. I missed birthdays, Christmas, and I had an epiphany that it didn't have to be that way anymore. I was making a choice instead of being with them. I decided my children were more important."

McManus, who will be 66 in May, sat down and recalled his nearly 33 years in law enforcement, all in Del Norte County.

He got a taste for law enforcement in Los Angeles in a short stint with the housing police but it was in the process of being absorbed by the county and the state. So, he decided it was a good time to work for a sheriff's department, not a police department or PD as McManus commonly refers to the brother organization. And he wanted to work in a small county.

So he came to stay with in-laws in Del Norte County with no job waiting. He tended bar in Gasquet until he went through the Redwoods Police Academy and, as luck would have it, the DNCO was the first to offer him a job.

Over the years, as the community grew, other deputies would leave for the police force or work at the new Pelican Bay State Prison. But McManus stayed with what he was loving most.

"When I moved here, they hadn't even cut the trees down for the prison yet. They started the construction while I was on patrol," he said. "The assertion by the undersheriff at the time was when the prison opens up, our wages will go up along with theirs. That never happened. But the thing of it is, even though the wages are better someplace else, I loved what I did. So I stayed."

He also never transitioned to a police department.

"I didn't want to go to the PD because it was much too small a jurisdiction for me. I like rolling from the Oregon border on 199 all the way down to the Humboldt county line, Code 3 (an emergency response with lights and sirens), that's a nice feeling," McManus said.

He was the first patrolman assigned to Sheriff Mike Ross's new narcotics task force under the guidance of the California Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement (BNE). It proved to be one of the few parts of his job McManus did not enjoy. So he returned to patrol duty.

Then he discovered his first love in law enforcement — SWAT (special weapons and tactics).

"When I inherited it, it was under-trained, and didn't have any continuity," McManus said. "It was making a transition in those days from guys who put on camos, had rifles, went out and surrounded a building. It had evolved a lot."

McManus hooked up with a couple of FBI agents from the San Francisco SWAT team who were also part of the training division. He got them to bring their basic 40-hour training course to Del Norte (it's now 80 hours).

"When we came out of that course, we were tight. We were trained up, FBI techniques are cutting edge. Always had a really good relationship with them after that. I absolutely loved tactical work," McManus said.

"Being in SWAT was very satisfying. Because it's who cops call when they need help. You're the last resort. There is satisfaction training to the point where you feel confident you can handle the situation or get more

people there to handle the situation. In a community, there's always that feeling that there's somebody there to help you if something bad happens. I liked being the person they called," he added.

Then in 1995, McManus was promoted to detective. For 8 years he grew to love investigations. He said every police officer has a form of investigation they enjoy more than anything else — narcotics, burglary, sexual assault.

"For me, I enjoyed homicide investigation more than anything else. Because you're trying to seek justice for somebody who's not here anymore. That's kind of a pure mission. Hunt them down. There's a lot of satisfaction with that," McManus said.

Being a detective was wonderful, he said, but being a sergeant over and above was even better.

In 2004, McManus earned a promotion to sergeant — one of the most important jobs in law enforcement, he'll tell you.

"Sergeant is a leadership job. Talk to any cop that has done a spread of duty over his career, he'll tell you, as I will, being a sergeant is the best job he ever had. It's your chance to mentor younger deputies, lead them, be a resource for them. You're a leader of the team. While a part of the team, the sergeant has to stand a little bit apart from the deputies. Best job I ever had," he said.

In his nearly 33 years, McManus has worked with four sheriffs — Mike Ross, Jim Maready, Dean Wilson and Erik Apperson. He said he probably grew closest to Apperson. But he still likes to rib Apperson about the days he would "chase" him around at the high school. The high school used to be part of the sheriff's office jurisdiction before it became part of the city.

"I like to give him a bad time about that. I remember when he started as a correctional officer here when he was 18. He was twice as big as he is now. It was interesting to see him grow. When he got a job at PD and sent to the academy, he really blossomed. He's always been a top-notch communicator. He was kind of the long shot. Nobody gave him much of a chance to unseat a two-term sheriff. Erik is a master manipulator of social media. Social media was his ability to connect with people in that race," McManus said.

Now that he's decided to hang it up, McManus won't completely sever his ties with the sheriff's office. After the last 8 years as range master, he'll still teach firearms, help out with the occasional cold investigation and be extra help and schedule when it's convenient.

McManus admits that much dedication to his career has taken a toll on his personal life.

"I've had two marriages over my career. Raised three kids from the first marriage. The second marriage, I had three more kids and recently went through a divorce. Divorce is kind of an occupational hazard. I have a 17-year-old girl going to college next year, a 14-year-old boy in high school and a 2-year-old. I wanted to spend more time with my kids. It was just time. My priority needed to be to give my time to my children instead of my profession," he said.

His retirement plans, he quickly stated, involve no fishing.

“I’ve never had been a fisherman. I have a house on four acres, and a lot of work to do there,” he said.
“Basically, I’m going to be busy being a pop.”