

By RACHEL COLEMAN • Leader & Times

‘If you want to help your fellow man, you have to keep straight in your mind’

Seward County Undersheriff Gene Austin has seen a little bit of everything in his 44-year career in law enforcement: births, deaths, crime, punishment, the growth of technology and the tendency for human behavior to stay just about the same no matter how much society changes. One thing will be different after this week, though, as Austin retires. Coworkers and friends have planned a reception to honor his many years of service to Liberal and the county. Though he acknowledges “it might sound like an old cliché,” Austin chose law enforcement as a vocation because he wanted to help people.

“I grew up in Lamar, Colo., where my dad was part of the volunteer sheriff’s reserve posse,” he said. “So I knew a lot of the guys in the sheriff’s department, they’d come by our house and have coffee with my dad, and I was just around them all the time. I was basically raised that way.” Austin started out as a dispatcher in Lamar. Later, with a wife and a growing family, he moved to Gunnison, Colo., “up in the mountains where it’s nice,” he recalled. Though he relished the beautiful scenery and the fishing, Austin opted to enlist in the United States Air Force to work as a security policeman a few years later. After that, he moved his family back to Lamar, then to Elkhart, Hooker, Okla., and finally to Liberal in 1991, where he put in a five-year stint at the Liberal Police Department before moving to the county sheriff’s side of local law enforcement. “I’ve enjoyed all the work,” he said. “There have been highs and lows, just like everything. A lot has changed over the years. When I started out, we didn’t have modern equipment. The closest computer was in Pueblo, Colo., and we’d have to radio them if we needed information. I remember when the sheriff’s office [in Lamar] finally got a teletype machine, some type of military one, and we got our information off that.”

Austin recalls receiving bulletins about stolen cars, the occasional wanted criminal, and other violations. The flow of information was sluggish compared to law enforcement now, which equips officers with computers in their vehicles in order to obtain up-to-the-minute information during routine traffic stops.

“We had a lot of notepads,” he said. “We kept notes on everything we did. We didn’t have cell phones. And our equipment was not as technical. Take for example DUIs. It used to be you’d stop a guy, do a few little roadside tests, have him blow into the machine, and if his blood alcohol level was over a certain amount, he went to jail. Now, the instruments are much better, we can get information on people and pass it back and forth. We might have a DUI stop but we get information more quickly if there’s more to the story. It’s so much better. A definite advantage.”

Austin also noted changes in the legal system, some of which he felt were long overdue.

“As young folks like to say, ‘back in the day’ domestic violence was a big problem. You didn’t act on it if you were called out to a house where they were arguing. You’d take Joe Blow to a friend’s house and tell him to sleep it off, it was all cool and groovy, so we thought,” he said. “Well, it’s not. It’s really a firecracker about to go off. As a society, we’ve changed the laws. It should have been done a long time ago.”

Austin has seen his share of situations, particularly domestic violence calls, “that escalate so fast. It can get completely out of control real quick,” he said. “They’ve got that new domestic violence law, and it’s a good law.”

Over the years, Austin recalled “there were times I went home and couldn’t sleep. I’ve lost good friends in accidents. I once had a kid kill himself right in front of me. It was half a block from my own house, and my first reaction was, ‘Where are my kids?’” They were safe at a neighbor’s home, but Austin said it took a while for him to get past the trauma.

“It’s kind of hard. You develop a weird sense of humor. It basically comes down to being a little crazy in order to do a crazy job,” he said, as depicted in the book and television series MASH. “A lot of people get burnout, quit, go to the oilfield or some other job. If you want to hang in there and help your fellow man, help the people that need your assistance, you have to keep on top of it by keeping straight in your mind.”

Other events were less traumatic, like the time Austin and a state trooper chased a speeding car into town.

“They wouldn’t stop, and we chased them right to the hospital. The daddy and I went to work and delivered the baby right there in the driveway,” Austin said. “There is a little humor to that. When the kid killed himself in front of me, that wasn’t funny at all.”

At the Seward County Sheriff’s Department, “they call me old school,” he said. “I do things the old way, get the job done. In Lamar, I walked a beat for two years. I witnessed wrecks that took place, crunch-bang, right in front of me. Found a guy hanging on a bar sign. He was alive, but barely. Once I came upon a guy who’d been stabbed many times, out in front of a bar. I had a walkie-talkie at the time, and called for help. The guy who’d done the stabbing was inside the bar, so I went and got him. It’s been an interesting career.”

Austin hasn’t made specific plans for his retirement, outside of keeping busy, he said.

“I’ll help the veterans with the American Legion, doing exactly what I don’t know, but whatever they need. I have odd jobs to take care. I can watch the grass grow,” he said with a chuckle. “Just relax. Keep going.”

As he looks back over the past five decades, though, Austin is glad to have stayed with one career for so long, and to leave on a happy note.

“I’ve worked with a great bunch of people,” he said, “Liberal has its ups and downs like every

community, but everybody's got their own expertise and cumulatively, we've got a great team."

Law enforcement officers interact with the public and then move on to the next day's problems. It's difficult to gauge the influence Austin has exerted on the community, and "there's probably some out there that I'll never know about," he mused. "I hope I've touched somebody or other in a positive manner."