By LARRY PHILLIPS • Leader & Times Seward County Sheriff Bill McBryde has made his decision on who will be the department's new undersheriff. Former Sgt. Gene Ward was officially promoted to the position Monday. "I was pretty excited," Ward said Monday. "I want to really thank Sheriff McBryde for giving me the opportunity to be the undersheriff."

Ward is replacing Gene Austin, who recently retired, and Ward said Austin is a hard act to follow. "I have really big shoes to fill with Gene retiring," Ward said. "He is quite a guy." War d, 48, was raised in a military family – his father recently retired from the U.S. Army – and that's what brought him to the Sunflower State.

"My father was transferred to Fort Riley, and thats' how we came to Kansas. I graduated from high school in Abilene," he said.

He started working in the meat packing business, and he came to work for National Beef in Liberal in 1987, where he worked until 1993, leaving as a supervisor.

But while working nights, he had started day classes at Seward County Community College with thoughts of becoming a school teacher.

"My counselor out there was Larry Wade, and he said, 'Gene, you have the demeanor to be a good cop,'" Ward said. "I ended up taking one class – criminal investigations, and I was hooked."

Ward had also made friends with a Seward County Sheriff's Reserve Deputy by the name of Randy Johnson.

"He's the one who talked me into becoming a reserve deputy," Ward said. "That was in 1992."

Ward gave up law enforcement for awhile, but came back to the sheriff's department in 1999. Since that time, he had worked his way up to sergeant – and now undersheriff.

"You know, I learned a long time ago that's it's important to listen – to everybody," he said. "I have taken a little bit from everybody and tried to do my best. I've had a lot of positive influences within the sheriff's office, and that's what has got me to where I am."

Ward also acknowledged his wife's role in his career.

"My wife has been a strong supporter for me," he said. "And it takes a lot to be an officer's wife."