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“Jim Brenneman – 50 Years of Community Service”



Not many people can say they've given 50 years of service to a city. Starting out in 1962 as a City of Norfolk policeman to more recently serving for 12 years as Ward 3 city councilman, Jim Brenneman is one of those few.

None of it would have happened but for the Blizzard of 1949. When the mountains of snowfall made travel impossible, Brenneman was let go from the job in his hometown of Columbus as a deliveryman. His parents had already moved to Norfolk so he joined them, finding employment at Ballantyne Furniture.

That July he joined the navy and was assigned to the U.S.S. Juneau for over three years. In 1950 the ship was patrolling the Pacific Ocean when orders came to head to Korea. Five Korean boats soon attacked the battleship causing Brenneman to fire the first naval round of the Korean Conflict.

Returning home to Norfolk he married Cleone Janssen in 1954 and worked again at the furniture store until starting a painting business with his brother. In April of 1962, he decided to become part of the Norfolk police force.

“Training included two days in a car with a senior office showing us what doors to shake,” Brenneman recalled with a smile.

It turned out he had an eye for investigating. When Berel's Men Shop was robbed, Brenneman tracked

down the thieves by finding discarded leather coats and a man peddling men's clothing.

With no detectives on staff more of the investigations were handed to Brenneman. In four years he was promoted to captain and then assistant chief and in 1969 he was appointed to chief of police.

“It was a great ride- a lot of things happening. I was able to write and secure grants for equipment and personnel. There were only 13 officers and staff when I started and there were 34 officers plus staff when I left. Grants also helped pay for additional cruiser cars and equipment,” Brenneman said.

There were also tough times. In the 70's five teens were killed at 24th and Norfolk Avenue after leaving prom and being struck by a drunk driver.

"I had to knock on doors and tell parents they'd lost their child. It was the hardest task I had to perform as a police chief," Brenneman said.

He recalls the first fatality he had to investigate where a three year old had run onto the street and later when a mother killed five of her children.

"You never forget those things," Brenneman said.

After his retirement from the police force in 1987 he took a job in the city's planning and community development office and then transferred to the permits and codes department.

For eight years he was what was then called the "general inspector" necessitating the need for him to learn enough about electrical work and water systems to make sure homes and businesses in Norfolk were safe.

He left that position in 1995 which he refers to as his second retirement. Instead, he got on the Norfolk planning commission. In 2000 he filed for office as a city councilman candidate.

"I didn't have an agenda. I did it for the betterment of the community. I would keep an open mind and do what I thought was best for the city," Brenneman said.

Reflecting on his half century of city work, Brenneman cites the many improvements in Norfolk with one of the biggest being the flood control project in Norfolk. He cited the city's excellent wastewater and water plant as great assets for growth.

"The city should be proud of the hospital system and the excellent educational system. Our fire department ISO rating is one of the highest in the state and we're recognized as having good law enforcement services," Brenneman said.

He also cited the new chamber offices and "the tremendous asset of the acquisition of the city offices."

His commitment to Norfolk hasn't been just in city service. Brenneman has been the treasurer for the Orphan Grain Train since its inception. He's been active in Grace Lutheran Church where he is a member of the Building and Restoration Committee. He has served on the building and fundraising committees for Lutheran High Northeast and he is the vice chairman of the Madison County Diversion Board. He also had the task of assigning 9-1-1 addresses to all rural residents in Madison and Stanton counties.

"I've enjoyed every minute of it. It's time for a change and Josh Moenning will do a good job for Ward 3. I'm leaving the city in good hands," Brenneman said.

Of all of the awards Brenneman has been presented over the years including his induction into the Nebraska Law Enforcement Hall of fame, Brenneman noted the one he received this past year from the Norfolk Chamber of Commerce as one of the most meaningful. In April he was presented with the Edward I. Vrzal Outstanding Citizen Award. It was honor to receive and also a poignant reminder of his start in community service. Forty years ago then Mayor Vrzal "stuck his neck out" and appointed Brenneman as police chief.