

TRIBUTE TO SHERIFF MEARL  
JUSTUS

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, my home county of St. Clair, IL, lost a dedicated public servant this week. Mearl Justus—aptly named “justice”—passed away Tuesday at the age of 81. He had retired only 1 week earlier after serving eight terms as St. Clair County sheriff.

Mearl Justus was a legend. He was funny, he was innovative, and he was a creative thinker who was always looking for new and better ways to run his department. Above all, he was deeply dedicated to the people he served in the county.

An editorial in the Belleville News-Democrat described him as “a 6 feet 2 inch teddy bear with a sailor’s vocabulary and a hero’s heart. He was gruff. He was endearing. He was a champion, rescuing us from the bad guys for 60 years.” What an epitaph.

He got off to a rocky start in life. He was 19 months old when his dad died, and he was raised by his grandparents. He was a high school dropout in 1953 when the mayor of Cahokia, IL, suggested he join the local police force. That is how the aptly named Mr. Justus began his nearly 60-year-long career in law enforcement.

He started as a part-time officer in the Cahokia Police Department. He earned his GED and went on to earn an associate’s degree at Southwestern Illinois College in Belleville and then earned a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice. He advanced quickly up the ranks and served as Cahokia’s police chief for 22 years. He ran for sheriff of St. Clair County in 1983 and won—his first run for elective office. He would be reelected seven times, never losing an election, and nobody came close.

Sheriff Justus loved his job and loved having fun. One of the most legendary tales of his years as sheriff was when he sent notices to several hundred fugitives from justice telling them they had won a free pair of sneakers from the fictional Nabbir Shoestore. When the scofflaws turned up to claim their sneakers, the sheriff’s department locked them up. The department made over 50 arrests that day and 1 the next despite the fact that the prior day’s arrests had been widely reported in the news.

He closed up shop with a sign that read: “Closed. Catch ya next time.” He once explained to a reporter, “In this business, to keep from going off the deep end, you need that humor.”

Mearl Justus didn’t drink or smoke and rarely carried a gun because he said it was bulky and “it tears my clothes up.”

He sold advertising space on patrol cars and put public service announcements on their fenders. He provided jail inmates with a garden to grow vegetables. The prisoners grew their produce and gave any extra to local nursing homes.

Sheriff Justus was so dedicated to his work that he and his wife Audrey lived

for years in a three-bedroom apartment above the county jail. He said he figured that is where he was needed. At first, the couple found the routine cell checks a little disturbing, but they grew fond of their living arrangement and even raised a granddaughter in their apartment.

Over the course of his six decades of public service, Mearl Justus established several programs for local schools, including Stranger Danger awareness training. He also introduced the D.A.R.E. Program in the St. Clair schools long before others had it.

Sheriff Justus’s success and dedication were widely admired by his peers, who elected him president of the Illinois Sheriffs’ Association. He was also chairman of the board of his region’s Major Case Squad.

In recent years Sheriff Justus led efforts to combat crime and vandalism on MetroLink trains, the county’s light rail transit system, making the system safer for those who depend on it. That is where I came to know him. You see, this MetroLink is a light rail train service that has been one of the most popular things that has happened in that region. I grew up in that region. I used to kid my friends from St. Louis that I grew up in a suburb known as East St. Louis, and they all laughed because nobody considers Illinois to be part of St. Louis.

Well, it turned out that station in East St. Louis for MetroLink was a critical part of the political agreement that led to the creation of this important light rail system. But we had a problem. East St. Louis has been notoriously dangerous for years, and there was a question: How in the world could we expect anybody to wait at the train station with all the dangerous street crime in East St. Louis?

Mearl Justus stepped up. His St. Clair County Sheriff’s Department provided the protection that was needed to establish that MetroLink station in my hometown of East St. Louis and to give people the peace of mind that if they wanted to board or leave a train or park their car there, there would always be reliable law enforcement. Mearl Justus showed the way for many of us when we couldn’t think of how to resolve this quandary. That is the kind of problemsolver he was.

Mearl Justus had an amazing sense of humor. For many years, his own Web site featured the sheriff wearing a sombrero and a boast that any local event featuring Mearl Justus as the master of ceremonies would draw twice as many people.

He cared deeply about the people. He hosted “Slumber in the Slammer” fundraisers for a women’s crisis center, allowing people to sleep in the jail in exchange for a donation to the local crisis center. He once arranged cataract surgery for a woman whose savings had been stolen.

He said he looked forward to coming to work every day and wanted people to think of him as an honest, people-

oriented public official. He is going to be remembered for that and so much more. Mearl Justus made St. Clair County not just a safer place but a better place. I am honored to have known him. He was a fun person to be around, but you knew that when it came to his job, he took it very, very seriously.

My wife Loretta and I send our condolences to his wife Audrey, his daughters Kay and Debra; and his three granddaughters and three great-grandchildren.

RETIREMENT OF ILLINOIS STATE  
SENATOR JEFFREY M.  
SCHOENBERG

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I rise today to honor my friend, Illinois State Senator Jeff Schoenberg, on his more than two decades of service in the Illinois General Assembly.

Jeff was elected to the Illinois House in 1990 at the age of 30. He served six terms there before being elected to the Illinois Senate in 2003, where he rose through the ranks, serving as assistant majority leader, chairman on the Commission on Government Forecasting and Accountability, and vice chairman of the Appropriations Committee. More importantly, Jeff Schoenberg has been a dedicated public servant to his constituents in Evanston and to the people of Illinois for 22 years.

During his time in the Illinois General Assembly, Jeff sponsored a bill that would provide better access to quality health care and give consumers the opportunity to make better choices for their health. He also secured more than \$5 billion in Federal funds for safety net hospitals such as Mount Sinai, Mercy, and Holy Cross.

Jeff Schoenberg supported the Illinois Safe Choice Zones Act, which helped pave the way for Illinois’ pioneering work in stem cell research, and insisted on greater accountability and oversight at the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority.

A father of two himself, Jeff was critical to the passage of a measure allowing schools to keep and administer epinephrine for anaphylactic shock following the death of a 13-year-old girl from Chicago who had an allergic reaction to peanut oil while at school.

Jeff also understood foreign policy issues, including support for legislation to divest State pension funds from foreign countries doing business with Iran and drawing attention to the genocide in Cambodia. Jeff visited Cambodia last month as part of a delegation representing the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Incoming State Senator Daniel Biss will have large shoes to fill given how well Jeff has served the Illinois Senate’s Ninth District. Since the outset of his political career, Jeff has been inspired by the likes of Congressman and Federal Judge Abner Mikva and U.S. Senator PAUL SIMON, for whom he and I both worked.

Jeff’s dedication to service now takes on a new focus in improving the lives