



Ontario County Sheriff Philip Povero: "We Made a Difference Together"

"Are you Sheriff Povero?" the voices asked.

This question is expected in New York State where Philip Povero has served as Ontario County Sheriff for the past 28 years, but this was different. This time Sheriff Povero and his wife Cyndie were vacationing, sitting on a quiet beach near Bradenton, Florida, over a thousand miles away from home.

"I remember Cyndie looked at me like 'We can't go anywhere,'" Sheriff Povero joked. "Then we ended up talking with the couple who were also from Ontario County and were in Florida as snowbirds. Next thing you know, we were following them to where they had purchased a retirement home and that's where we found ours, too!"

After 47 years of service in law enforcement in Ontario County, Sheriff Povero will retire on December 31, 2018. His successor—Deputy Kevin Henderson—was elected in the November 6 election.



For many in the County and those in the statewide law enforcement community, Sheriff Povero has been a lamp-lighter and will be missed.

Yates County Sheriff Ronald Spike explains:

"Without hesitation Sheriff Povero is like a brother to me. With adjoining counties we did many cases together in the 1970s and 1980s as patrol deputies and as investigators, especially narcotics work, and nighttime surveillances making arrests. He was elected Sheriff in 1990 and myself in 1991. For years as Sheriffs we've travelled many miles to public safety meetings across the state, especially to Albany. I often jokingly say 'I am Senator Povero's driver.' We have prided ourselves as instructors for the annual newly elected Sheriffs' school. He has been a leader in the Finger Lakes region with accreditation standards, police training and our summer camp for kids program. We've always been able to bounce issues, operations, personnel problems, decision making and budget matters off each other. He could have easily gone to a higher political office, but his heart was in being Sheriff, and the Sheriffs across the state respect his leadership, wit, integrity and professionalism for the office. There's an old saying that you can tell where the lamp-lighter has been by the light left on behind them. Phil is a lamp-lighter for the office of Sheriff, and the people's lawman for Ontario County."

Longest-serving Sheriff


In the Ontario County Sheriff's Office (OCSO) there is a large conference room. Hanging on the wall is a calendar that has pictures of Sheriff Povero—one from early on in his career as a deputy and one from present day as Sheriff. With the photos are the words, "Longest-serving Sheriff."

Sheriff Povero began his career with the Ontario County Sheriff's Office (OCSO) in 1972 as a corrections and communications officer. In January, 1973, he was assigned to the Sheriff's Road Patrol. From 1977 to 1990, he served as an investigator in the Criminal Investigation Division. He was elected to the Office of Sheriff in 1990 and has served in that role for nearly 28 years, the longest tenure of any Sheriff in Ontario County's history.

Ontario County is 644 square miles located in the heart of the Finger Lakes in Upstate NY. It is sandwiched between Canandaigua and Seneca Lakes, making it home to many wineries and farms taking advantage of the fertile soil, warm summers and cold winters. Though rural in many respects, the County is considered part of the greater Rochester metropolitan area and has a population of 110,000. Its major cities include Geneva, Canandaigua and Phelps. Since taking office Sheriff Povero has been dedicated to carrying out the OCSC mission to deliver effective and responsive law enforcement services to all citizens of Ontario County in a fair and equitable manner—to serve and protect the public, in order to make Ontario County a safe place in which to live, work or travel.

CAREER MILESTONES

- Implemented the D.A.R.E Program
- Provided School Resource Officers to Ontario County school districts
- "Project Life Saver," a radio system to locate missing Alzheimer patients
- Enhanced communications system and 911 center
- Awarded the Crime Victim Advocate Longevity Award
- Established Scholarship at Finger Lakes Community College
- Chairman of the Partnership for Ontario County
- President of the New York State Sheriffs' Association
- Secretary of the New York State Sheriffs' Institute
- Chairman of the Finger Lakes Law Enforcement Academy Board of Directors

A portrait photograph of Sheriff Povero, a man with dark hair, wearing a dark shirt, looking directly at the camera against a red background.

Accreditation

Sheriff Povero has spent his entire life in Ontario County. He is a graduate of Geneva High School and Finger Lakes Community College, and went to Rochester Institute of Technology where he earned a Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice. Although being in law enforcement was always his goal, becoming Sheriff was not.

"I actually never wanted to be Sheriff; it really wasn't on my radar because I was happy and challenged investigating crimes," said Sheriff Povero. "But when my predecessor Sheriff Gary Stewart retired, I was encouraged to run, and it has become my greatest honor."

Sheriff Povero is responsible for the overall management and control of OCSO. He also considers himself the agency's number one cheerleader. During his tenure, the OCSO has



acquired state accreditation for its law enforcement, corrections, emergency communications, civil, and court security divisions, plus correctional health care accreditation with National Commission on Correctional Health Care. The OCSO is one of the only Sheriff's Offices in the state to have achieved all six professional accreditations.

These accreditation accomplishments give him peace in his decision to retire.

"The reason I'm so comfortable with a new Sheriff assuming the role is because I know we have the best professional standards in place with a stellar team of people maintaining them," said Sheriff Povero. "I eagerly invite a new Sheriff into this environment because I'm incredibly proud of what we have achieved together in this department and with our community partners. We are a benchmark for quality law enforcement in New York State."

Thin Blue Line

Sheriff Povero recalls the countless number of staff meetings that have occurred around the extra-large table in the conference room—decades of conversations, many recently designed to make sure all administrators and supervisors are running as efficiently as possible when a new Sheriff takes their place.

"My family at the Sheriff's Office means so much to me—I love all of them and pray for them every day," said Sheriff Povero. "We have



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celebrated successes and cried in our losses and I will miss them all dearly. I leave knowing they are part of an organization where they believe in the mission of taking care of others and keeping them safe."

He also recounts the hundreds of meetings with other local government, health, education and prevention leaders and how one of the things he is most proud of is that there were never any turf issues or political bias that impeded the right thing to do when making decisions in public safety. He said that generally people were able to come together to recognize an issue to solve a problem—whether it meant combating drugs, supporting those with mental health problems or voting on budget to ensure our first responders had the best training and equipment available to them.

"Working together as a team in the community, we have made a difference in the quality of life in Ontario County," he said.



For a moment he's quiet. He's thinking now about the cases he's been involved with, the things he's seen and how each victim, criminal and case shaped him as an officer of the law.

Early in his investigative days, Sheriff Povero was investigating the case of a 7 year-old girl who had been brutally raped and murdered. It was the responsibility of Sheriff Povero and his team to put a case together with a conviction.

"When I first saw the little girl on a slab at the morgue, I realized how cruel and sadistic people in our country can be to commit such a violent and heinous act," said Sheriff Povero. "At the same time, it also made me realize how fragile and precious life is. That as law enforcement, we need to be that thin blue line to protect those that are vulnerable—especially our children."

Advocating for Children & Seniors

Sheriff Povero is widely regarded for his reputation as a collaborator who works with other County and regional entities to enhance public safety, particularly for Ontario County's youth, senior citizens, and those who suffer from substance abuse or mental health problems.

His efforts have resulted in placing school resource officers in all of Ontario County's schools and establishing a youth court.

"It's so important that police and kids have a chance to forge positive relationships," he said. "School resource officers are there for both the safety of the people in schools, but also to act as positive role models and impress upon the kids that developing good habits can help prevent them from being victimized and will help them make good life decisions.



We've also helped to set up a strong youth court in the Ontario school district. That way, if a young person has a minor offense, they can work with law enforcement and their peers to be accountable for their actions without being formally introduced to the criminal justice system...our number one goal is to get them graduated and help them be productive adults."

This idea of protection and education is extended to the other end of the age spectrum with Ontario County's senior population.

"Senior citizens are highly targeted and victimized at record rates by people in and out of the country who are looking to get them to turn over their money," said Sheriff Povero. "We've partnered with AARP and Office of the Aging to hold forums to alert our senior population of crimes, scams and frauds so they are prevented from becoming a victim. We've also established the group Seniors and Law Together (SALT). This council meets regularly to identify safety concerns in the community and works to help seniors feel more comfortable at home, in stores and on the road."

Better Serving Addiction & Mental Health

Substance abuse is driving the criminal justice system today. "On any given day, 80 percent of the jail population in Ontario County is there due to a drug-related crime," he said.

The OCSO operates a 300-bed correctional facility that opened 14 years ago. Much of the crime today is generated by the opioid epidemic, but it's also other substance abuse-related crime, including driving while intoxicated, domestic abuse and property crimes. In fact, shoplifting to support addiction has become such an issue at Eastview Mall in Victor, NY that Sheriff Povero has assigned two full-time police officers to that patrol every day.

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"Things always seem to get worse before they get better and right now things are getting worse," said Sheriff Povero referring to the use of Fentanyl and the increasing death rate associated with manmade opioids. "We need a movement like Mothers Against Drunk Driving which had tremendous reach in the 1980s in helping people understand the devastation brought on by drunk driving and helped change laws.

What we're working on here in Ontario County is putting the right programs in place so that rehabilitation and behavior modification can take place. We need to be able to point people with addiction in the right direction for care and support in the community so they do not reoffend. They have to deal with the root causes," he said.

More and more mental health issues are also playing a role in today's law and community landscape. The question of jail versus hospital is a topic of much debate. In Ontario County, local hospitals, healthcare professionals and law enforcement authorities are working together to develop a county-wide crisis intervention team to intervene where appropriate.

"This is really important because it's shifting the way we handle people with mental health and emotional issues," said Sheriff Povero. "In some situations where law enforcement is requested we're finding that the issues is less of a criminal nature and more of a mental health problem. Since the summer, this team has been working to find alternatives to incarceration that will better support people with mental health needs."

The bottom line Sheriff Povero said, "We're not going to arrest ourselves out of the substance abuse problem and we're not going to arrest ourselves out of the mental health problem. If we are going to be successful, we have to work together. And, it's complicated. It will take a lot of team work, but I know people can be helped and I know people who have suffered can—with support—lead normal lives."



Sign Here

Law enforcement put their lives on the line every day as first responders, never knowing what they are walking into or what they'll encounter. As criminal investigators, police spend their days bringing drug dealers, murders and arsonists to justice. This often means running in the direction of fear with the willingness to make personal sacrifices for total strangers. It's also means missing games and recitals and interrupting birthday parties and holidays.

"There is a reason why law enforcement professionals are able to retire after 20 years of service," he said. "It's a job that can wear on you and your family, and whether you've done the job for a year or 50 years, you need support, outlets and allies."



Sheriff Povero credits his family and friends for providing that support. His wife Cyndie is his greatest supporter, along with his adult children and grandchildren. Sheriff Povero's daughter Kate and her son Charlie (2) reside in Ontario County, while his son Tony and his children Noah (5) and Cecilia (3) live in Atlanta.



He also values his relationships with other Finger Lakes area Sheriffs for their friendship, assistance and council. "We're a tight knit group," the Sheriff said. "I will truly miss them."

A career in law enforcement can be very heavy at times, but there are also moments of levity. It doesn't negate the seriousness of the situation, but it does help you cope and keep pushing forward to do your job to the best of your ability.

Sheriff Povero has told this story to recruits in the Finger Lakes Training Academy for many years:

"Around 2:00 a.m. I was called to a domestic disturbance in Phelps, N.Y. This was in the early 1970s. When I got there, a woman told me that her husband had just driven away in his car and that he was intoxicated. So, I got back in my car and start to look for him. A few minutes went by; I found him and pulled him over. I was on duty, so of course I was in my uniform. When I walked up to the car and asked him for his driver's license and registration, he extended his hand and said, 'I'd like to give this to you.'" The guy is handing me a 20 dollar bill. 'This is for you,' he said. 'I'll just go on my way.' That's when I said to him thank you very much, but I get so many bribes that I have a hard time keeping track of who gave me what. I then took out my pen and asked him if he could sign the back of \$20 so I knew it came from him. 'So you get credit,' I said. He goes, 'No problem,' and signs his name on the back! Now besides driving while intoxicated he is also arrested for bribery and was indicted on both charges."

We Make a Difference Together

"There are very few things in my life that I have been more dedicated to or more love with than law enforcement," said Sheriff Povero. "The only exception is family."

To know this is true, just ask Sheriff Povero about his grandchildren. His smile will become so wide it fills his whole face and his eyes will brighten as he tells you about what they're doing and where they are. He'll tell you about the condominium he and Cyndie own in Atlanta so they can spend time there—specifically the month of February which is a big birthday month in that household! And, Charlie, oh that Charlie, who at a recent Ontario County Fireman's Banquet grinned and clapped and clapped and grinned and stole the show!



"When Charlie smiles, I smile," said Sheriff Povero. "You know a lot of people have been asking for me a long time when I was going to retire. Now that I am, people are asking me what I'll do with my time. I tell them I'm going to enjoy time with my family and travel while Cyndie and I are still healthy and can do it, and maybe someone will even teach me how to golf!"

Sheriff Povero jokes that he has clubs, but doesn't know how to play.

"My wife and I had a plan. We hoped for seven elections. That would take me to 47 years in law enforcement and just a month shy of my 68th birthday," Sheriff Povero said referring to his January 27 birthday. "I truly believe it's the right time—we're in a good place financially, emotionally and with our health where we can enjoy retirement spending time with family and friends and having new experiences."

However, he will remain connected to the community that has always been his home. The Poveros will keep a home in Ontario County and look forward to milder weather months so they can plant their garden and grow peppers and tomatoes as they do every year.

"I've dedicated my life to protecting the people of Ontario County and keeping them safe and I had a lot of help doing it," said Sheriff Povero. "We've recognized serious issues, tackled them head on and made positive strides. Working together we made a difference."

The lamp burns brighter in Ontario County because of it.