

**NEW YORK STATE
SHERIFFS' INSTITUTE**



EMPIRE SHERIFF BRIEF



Wayne County Sheriff Barry Virts Nicknamed "Mr. Compliance," Guided by 3 Principles: Safety, Integrity & Dignity

Most mornings when the alarm clock goes off at 5 a.m., Wayne County Sheriff Barry Virts is already awake, pouring through emails and preparing for the day ahead. Every day is different and requires the energy and decisiveness of the day before, as he proudly serves the people of Wayne County and as the newly elected president of the New York State Sheriffs' Association.

Each day ends in the same way, with a prayer:

"I pray that our deputies, corrections and court security officers are safe. That we all do our jobs with integrity, and that everyone we come into contact with is treated with dignity."



This is what over 40 years in law enforcement looks like and is the philosophy that guides Sheriff Virts and the 191 members of Wayne County Sheriff's Office (WCSO), located in Lyons, N.Y. It's a way of carrying one's self to respect yourself and others, and to be proud of the work and service that's done.

All Rise

Wayne County sits as a bedrock halfway between Rochester and Syracuse in New York State. It is made up of 15 towns, including County Seat Lyons and six others in the Western part of the county adjacent to Monroe County (Rochester, N.Y.), which represent 50 percent of its 93,000 population. The middle and eastern parts of the county are much more rural and include fruit groves, making Wayne County one of the state's top apple producing areas. The county is part of the Finger Lakes region and also lies on the south shore of Lake Ontario, forming part of the northern border of the United States with Canada.

Sheriff Virts has lived in Wayne County his entire life.

As an 8 year-old boy, young Barry Virts can recall sitting in the kitchen of his family home and listening as his father conducted court on the other side of a vinyl partition positioned for privacy in the home's foyer. His father Robert Virts was the justice of the peace in the town of Rose, N.Y., from 1964-67.

Sheriff Virts will tell you about the long lines of people on his front porch who waited patiently for their day in court or how his father would plow the driveway in the winter so people could have space to park their cars before making their case. Barry learned to take cues, like when a voice would say, "Bob you better take this case in the car," He knew something juicy was going on, and disappointedly his young ears would not be hearing the mature details of the story.

Sheriff Virts' father was the first of a string of honorable men who shaped him as a person and professional. Robert Virts later served as Rose Town Supervisor and was on the County Public Safety Committee. This meant frequent visitors to his family home, including then Wayne County Sheriff James Hurley and his Uncle Raymond "Buddy" Virts who was a Deputy Sheriff.

"I was a freshman in high school when one day, I vividly remember my Uncle Bud pulling into our driveway, jumping out of the red and white patrol car, and putting on his Stetson," said Sheriff Virts. "There was something about him—a presence, a strength, a sense of responsibility—that I wanted to emulate."

Years later, when we were both serving on the Wayne County Sheriff's Office force—he as a Lieutenant and Chief Administrator of the Jail and I as a Criminal Investigator, Uncle Bud would say, "Don't screw up the call slips because people won't know which Virts they're talking to. His reputation proceeded him...and me."

Mr. Compliance

Former Wayne County Sheriff Richard Piscioti was another role model. Although Sheriff Virts always wanted to serve as Sheriff—he describes himself as ambitious and dedicated—he was also very loyal to Piscioti and would have never have run against him. Sheriff Piscioti had given him many opportunities in law enforcement and promoted him throughout his career. But, when Sheriff Piscioti decided to retire, Sheriff Virts decided it was his time.

Into that race, he carried with him the nicknames Piscioti had given him—"Mr. Compliance" and "The Fixer"—because of his insistence to do things right and do the right thing.

"I take it as a compliment," said Sheriff Virts. "I don't care if you're my best buddy or worst enemy, you'll be treated the same under my watch."

It got to be a joke with Sheriff Virts' parents. After his divorce, he would take his two daughters to dinner at his parents' house every Tuesday night. If there was a big case going on, his mother would often inquire about what was happening, asking for details, but Sheriff Virts would never share. Instead encouraging her to read about it in the newspaper as information became publicly available.

Sheriff Virts affirms his commitment to procedures and policies in his daily practices, and he's gained a reputation inside and outside of Wayne County, too. Peer Sheriffs across the state know him as "By-the-Book Barry."



In October 2014, Sheriff Virts wore a purple bowtie on "wear purple" day during Domestic Violence Awareness Month. It was the first time he had ever worn a bowtie and now wears one every day that he is not in his uniform. His collection boasts 25 bowties.

This attention to detail and dedication to professional law enforcement was useful as Sheriff Virts helped to complete the accreditation process for the Wayne County Jail and Civil Divisions. Accreditation is a progressive and contemporary way of helping police agencies evaluate and improve their overall performance to ensure the best, more contemporary and professional standards are in place and being met. There are 14 County Sheriff's Offices across the state that are fully accredited in all areas of operations.

More Than a Job

All cops have stories. It's a hazard of the job. Some have positive endings, and some are so raw and wrong, they shake you to the core. The first time this happened to Sheriff Virts was during Memorial Day weekend in 1988 when he was called by Child Protective Services to Strong Memorial Hospital in Rochester, N.Y.

When he entered the hospital room he saw a girl who had been badly beaten. Her limp body was connected to noisy, lit machines and tubes hung in every direction from her fragile frame. She was only 2 years-old. The same age as Barry's youngest daughter at the time.

Sheriff Virts says, "In that little girl, I saw my daughters and I realized immediately that what we do as police officers is very serious. People's lives are at stake, and we often come into the picture in those moments when people's lives have been changed in an instant. The only way to explain it is to say that a switch flipped for me that day and I have approached investigating crimes and speaking with victims differently ever since. What we do is much more than a job."

Sheriff Virts and his wife Sandy have been together since 1990, later marrying in 1995. They have a blended family of six adult children. Five are girls. All were already grown up by the time Virts became Sheriff, and everyone has been very supportive, especially his wife who accompanies him to about 40 public events each year. They are also blessed with 10 beautiful grandchildren.

"I can remember us telling the kids when they were young that they needed to be able to stand on their own two feet if anything ever happened. But, they called us out and said, 'Mom you don't have a college degree and dad, you only have a two-year degree.' We knew then that if we were going to guide our children, we would have to walk the talk ourselves."

Inspired by their children, Sandy went on to earn her college degrees in Human Services at Finger Lakes Community College and Empire College to become the Wayne County Director of the Head Start Program. For a time she helped with the process of coordinating what kids from Wayne County attended the New York State Sheriffs' Camp by coordinating with area schools and Sheriff Virts' Confidential Assistant Betty Rose. Sandy is now retired.



40 Years of Service

Sheriff Virts began his law enforcement career as a Correction's Officer in 1977 after attending Erie Community College and earning an A.A.S. in Criminal Justice. He returned to college, taking courses at Oswego—one class per semester while he juggled his career and the unpredictable, on-call-ness of its nature—and eventually earned his B.S. in Liberal Arts from Excelsior College.

In 1978, Sheriff Virts was transferred to the Road Patrol as a Deputy Sheriff. Then in 1985, he was promoted to Sergeant where he oversaw night patrols and investigated serious and fatal motor vehicle accidents as a member of the Crash Reconstruction Team. In 1988, Sheriff Virts was transferred to the Criminal Investigations Unit and was a hostage negotiator and polygraphist. In 1993, he was promoted to Lieutenant of Criminal Investigations in charge of all major felony crimes and six years later was promoted to Chief Deputy as the Chief Administrative Officer of the Wayne County Jail Facility.

Barry Virts was elected Sheriff in 2009 and is now in his third term as Wayne County's Chief Law Enforcement Officer. He manages an office of 191 employees and an 18 million dollar budget.

"I was first hired by the Wayne County Sheriff's Office on June 10, 1977, which as fate would have it was my 21st birthday," said Sheriff Virts. "Aside from the gift of life, it's the second best birthday gift I've ever received. The Office and its people—my peers and mentors—all of it has been a blessing."

Resigning to Run

Running for Sheriff required Sheriff Virts and his family to take a leap of faith. He had to resign. Due a 70 year-old law, called the Hatch Act, Virts was required to leave his job as Chief Deputy of

Corrections or risk a Hatch Act violation. Essentially, the Act prohibits government employees from engaging in some forms of political activity, such as accepting federal funding, which can be a major source of grant monies used legally by police agencies statewide.

Resigning was risky because the Sheriff's race was contested with three candidates (two Republicans and one Democrat) vying for the position. Another candidate at the time opted to keep their job versus continuing with their bid for Sheriff, narrowing the playing field to two.

Virts resigned and then was re-hired after being elected Wayne County Sheriff in 2009. He describes his role as to simply "keep the peace and work to prevent crime and investigate crime." Although, everyone knows there is nothing simple about that.



SHERIFF
WAYNE COUNTY

"The first year is the easiest because you're still running on adrenaline and the momentum of the campaign," said Sheriff Virts. "Each year after gets a little more complex and you can feel like you're being pulled in many different directions. Sometimes you wish you could be cloned, but thankfully we have a team of people working together to get the job done."

The WCSO includes: Civil Division, Corrections Division, Criminal Investigations Division, Criminal Records, Court Security, Honor Guard, Juvenile Division, K-9 Units, Recreational Safety, Crash Reconstruction Team, Road Patrol, Emergency Response Team and Specialized Teams. The Wayne County Jail Facility has a maximum capacity of 190 beds.

"If we can prevent crime from happening in the first place, then we can prevent many of the negative effects crime victims endure," added Sheriff Virts.

There is a huge emphasis on transparency and community outreach in Wayne County. This encompasses everything from how the budget is spent to releasing information to the public as soon as an arrest has been made. Accessibility is also critical.

"No matter where I am or what I'm doing, I want people to know that they can approach me and talk to me," said Sheriff Virts. "I understand that what people want is for us to be professional, effective, and efficient with tax dollars, and we do that."

There is no "I" in Team

As a father of six, Sheriff Virts has learned not to hover. This holds true at the office, too.

"Look, you have to check the engine in your car once in a while, so of course I check in on the staff," said Sheriff Virts, "But, there is a big difference between hovering and nudging. I see my role as the freighter nudging the ships in the river to help keep them moving forward to achieve our mission."

The WCSO mission is to preserve the rights of citizens and reduce fear in the county through the prevention of crime, protection of persons, property, and the maintenance of order in public places. To anticipate and respond to events which threaten public order and the protection of life and property.

"It's essential that all Sheriff's Office members and employees remember that in the execution of their duties they act not for themselves, but for the good of the public," said Sheriff Virts. "Our mission states that they will respect and protect the rights of individuals and perform their service with honesty, zeal, courage, discretion, fidelity and sound judgment."

Sheriff Virts takes this sentiment to heart—a heart which he often wears on his sleeve. Emotion can overtake him when he talks about his family, the cases that shaped him, and his WCSO team.

In 2011, the Sheriff's Office moved into a renovated facility that had formerly been used as a nursing home. In Sheriff Virts' new office there is a large sign that reads, "There is no 'I' in team."



Sheriff Virts first learned about teamwork while participating in high school team sports. In his role as Sheriff, the importance of a good team is even more important today.

"Every person in every function has a role to play," said Sheriff Virts. "When I make a decision, it may be the deputies and corrections officers who carry it out. We're all essential, but we're also all replaceable. My hope is that the next person in line learns from the past and does it better—that's how we progress."

A strong team is also needed to face the challenges of today.

Triumph for Victims

Sheriff Virts rattles off crime statics easily—a consequence of the current policing environment. He said that three out of four of every heroine users start out with a prescription from a doctor for pain management.

"It starts off with good intentions, but quickly becomes a major issue—one that hasn't escaped Wayne County. Our people are struggling and people are dying. Many users have begun to carry their own Narcan and we introduced Vivitrol into the jails three years ago," he said.

He also said that domestic violence represents 25 percent of all the work the Sheriff's Office does from call service, serving court orders, and other tasks related to domestic violence calls. This level of occurrence echoes disturbing trends nationwide. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men have been victims of some form of physical violence by an intimate partner within their lifetime, and on an average day, there are more than 20,000 phone calls places to domestic violence hotlines nationwide.

Sheriff Virts supports two [Victim Service Notification Systems](#) available to Wayne County and statewide by the New York State Sheriffs' Institute to help protect crime victims, including the Inmate Release Notification System and the Order of Protection Notification System.

"With the unpredictable and sometimes violent nature of the job, we now send two officers on all calls," said Sheriff Virts. "Every single contact is important and it's our goal to keep victims and officers safe."

While in office, Sheriff Virts' major accomplishments include instituting the Sex Offender Watch, Mobile Home Address Verification Program of sex offenders, Project Lifesaver, Citizen's Academy, Vivitrol in the Jail, streamlining the office's pistol Permit process, budget accountability and finishing the Accreditation Process for both the Jail and Civil Divisions. He also serves as the STOP-DWI Coordinator for Wayne County and as the state's STOP-DWI Western District Chairperson.

Sheriff Virts also converted the gymnasium in the jail into a one-room schoolhouse where inmates have the opportunity to learn marketable job skills to help them find work when they are released. He works closely with other area police and mental health and substance abuse professionals, as well as schools and community groups.

"I may be known for being a no nonsense law man," said Sheriff Virts. "But, more than anything we want to triumph for victims, and to help make people feel as whole as possible. Life is hard and not always fair, but if we all try to live honorably and with respect, we'll take care of each other."

People can follow Sheriff Virts and the Wayne County Sheriff's Department online at www.waynecosherriff.org, or on social media at [Facebook \(Wayne County Sheriff's Office\)](#) and Twitter (@waynecosherriff and @sheriffvirts).