

Nichols: tough-talking cop with a heart

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

FLANKED by his uniformed command officers, Sheriff John F. Nichols is undoubtedly commander in chief. It's not the crew cut or service ribbons that set him apart, but an aura of authority belied by his soft, round frame.

"I'm not too smart, but I'm strong and consistent," the new sheriff told a group of reporters.

"What I tell you today is the same goddamn thing I'll tell you tomorrow."

THAT TOUGH talkin' sheriff is a whole different Nichols from the one who worries about putting a desk between himself and a visitor, ticks off not just ages but heights and weights of his grandchildren and weeps openly at officers' funerals.

"The worst thing that happens to police is that everyone calls them cold," said the 55-year-old.

"They're not that kind of people. You don't see a kid shot or policeman killed without living with it day after day."

DURING FOUR DECADES of police work, Nichols built a solid reputation on tough talk and firm actions.

A sign on his office wall warns visitors: "I don't get mad — I get even. You too can be Nichols-ized. J.F. Nichols."

Another says: "Do a good job. Then you get to keep it."

Oakland County Executive Daniel Murphy backed him as the Republican sheriff candidate because of his "no-nonsense managing technique."

"He realizes he has a quasi military organization and expects it to act like one," explained Murphy. "He realizes discipline makes it work."

BUT YOU DON'T move from Detroit police commissioner to Farmington Hills police chief to Oakland County sheriff without being a bit flexible. At the helm of each of those very different law enforcement agencies, Nichols adopted a "troop oriented" management style.

As soon as he was on the job as sheriff, his deputies had donned starched brown uniforms and gleaming boots. There was kidding about which officers had enough hair to wear the close-cropped style sported by their leader.

"Uniforms are a good cohesive means of re-establishing that we're a unit and not just individuals," explained the World War II veteran who believes he would have been a "great general" if he hadn't become a Detroit cop.

BEHIND THE scenes, though, Nichols not only encourages his employees to do their own thing — but counts on it that they will.

"The last thing I want is a staff that sits around and says 'You're the greatest,'" the sheriff said, insisting he

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— John Nichols

wants "complete candor" from his employees.

"I'm the laziest sucker in the world. We pay these people to do what they're best at."

IN CONTRAST to former Sheriff Johannes F. Spreen — who recited poetry and was studying for his doctorate — Nichols' image is more down to earth.

While reporters sometimes couldn't quite figure out what Spreen meant, Nichols is so down to earth they have to clean out the cuss words before quoting him.

But while claiming to have attended the "University of Delray," the former southwest Detroit actually has a bachelor of science degree in police administration from Wayne State University. After dropping out of college in 1959, he returned in 1968 after WSU opened its police administration program.

"I felt it incumbent to offer myself up as a humble sacrifice," he said with a smile.

MOST OF WHAT Nichols learned about police work, though, came by experience.

Married and hustling groceries at Sam's Cut Rate, Nichols took the police exam with a friend whose father was a Detroit cop. After a year on the job, he enlisted in World War II, returning to the force in 1946.

Assigned to the downtown Detroit street patrol, he became a detective a year later.

After moving up through the ranks to detective inspector, Nichols in 1965 switched back to the uniform division as a district inspector. It was a rare move in a department where the "intermingling of the two branches was almost unheard of."

NICHOLS WAS named deputy superintendent, then superintendent, and served as Detroit police commissioner under Mayor Roman S. Gribble.

Between "protesters up and down Woodward" opposing the Vietnam War and the city's race riots, Nichols recalls those years as Detroit's "most turbulent."

"The whole damn society was getting ready to burn, burning or putting out fires," he said. Nichols is proud that further bloodshed was prevented after a Black Panther was killed by police.

"They used to accuse me of running the police department like an Army, but really at the time it was more of a military response than a police response," said Nichols, who won 24 meritorious service awards and is nicknamed "Uncle John" because of his traditional style.

"It was an exciting time, but a violent time."

WHILE RESPECTED as police commissioner, Nichols angered both black and white residents by refusing to end the controversial STRESS (Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets) program. Dressed as decoys, undercover

police arrested and even shot their attackers.

The "cop's cop" also upset members of his force by ordering them to live in the city and patrol in one-man cars, and he required officers accused of wrong doing to take lie detector tests.

In 1973, Nichols ran for Detroit mayor against Coleman Young. He takes pride in "coming closer than anyone else since."

"But I didn't know the political game that well and still don't," he said.

AFTER A STINT as executive vice president of Mason and Associates, a Birmingham security company, Nichols went back to police work.

For three years, he was underboss to his former Detroit boss, Oakland County Sheriff Spreen.

To this day, the two get along despite very different managerial styles. And while they almost went up against each other for sheriff, neither will throw mud at the other.

"We have a lot of philosophical differences, operational differences," explained Nichols, who fondly calls Spreen "John." "But the fact that there are differences doesn't make you incompatible."

"I'm not saying he's wrong and I'm right. But I think I am."

BELIEVING THAT Spreen was going to run for governor, Nichols decided to take a job as Farmington Hills, Nichols was persuaded by Republicans to run for sheriff last fall. When Spreen vacated the post to run for county executive, it took "a lot of the fun" out of the race for Nichols.

Ahead from the beginning, he wound up with 69.2 percent of the votes. "I was amazed and still can't understand it," said Nichols, who took back for Republicans the county's only Democrat post.

"I'm not a skilled politician. Just what you see is what you get."

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"If I had to rate the city from 1 to 10,

Sheriff John Nichols: "I think I've brought this unit together beyond my wildest dreams."
DAVID FRANK,
staff photographer



Farmington Hills would be the Bo Derek of cities; definitely a 10," said Nichols, who lives in nearby Novi.

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He has been working behind the scenes to rebuild a department fragmented by infighting.

Aside from putting everyone in uniforms, he quickly reorganized to streamline operations. He meets daily with his department heads, who are strongly encouraged to run their own shows.

"I've found for the most part if you clearly define what the mission is, it's best done by the people closest to it."

"Their job is to keep me out of trouble," said Nichols, who doesn't believe in an open-door policy. It has been his experience that employees won't seek out the boss — even if the door is always ajar.

"You've got to lounge around and drink coffee in the right place. They won't come see me; I've got to go out

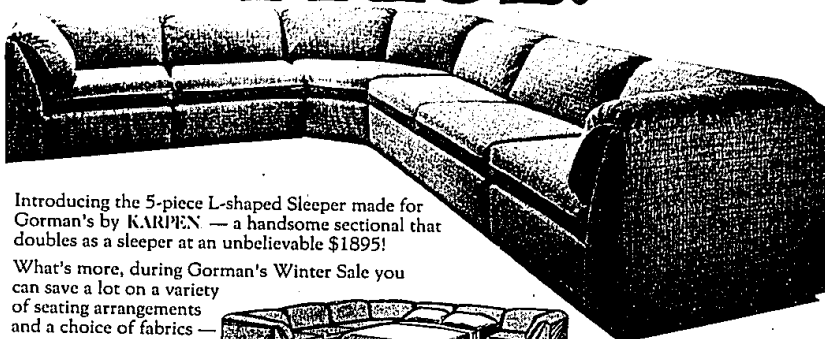
looking for them."

So far, he has been very pleased with the results. "I think I've brought this unit together. In fact, the response has been beyond my wildest damn dream," said Nichols excitedly.

"This is a damn good department." **ONE OF HIS** first priorities was deputizing members of local police departments, chiefs and prosecuting attorneys. Spreen had stopped the countywide deputization, causing what Nichols saw as a "festering sore" between area law enforcement agencies.

The biggest job ahead of him is creating more space in Oakland County Jail, which is so over capacity that inmates are sleeping on mattresses in the auditorium. Others are being detained in jails in other counties.

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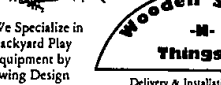
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