

## **GRAVATT MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN WASHINGTON COUNTY**

In Salem, Indiana, gawking fifth-graders filed into the county jail, guilty only of killing time. One after another, the students casually greeted their tour guide, a squat, smiling man with “Ernie” embroidered on his brown shirt. He recognized many of them, a disconcerting notion at first thought, since **Ernie Gravatt** is Washington County’s Chief Probation Officer. But Gravatt is a determinedly different probation officer, and the familiarity fits. He wants to reach people – and young ones especially – before duty calls. That way, duty might not call. Encourage them now or punish them later. What choice is that?

The jail tour was a follow-up to a visit Gravatt made to the school, as part of his routine involvement in the schools and other youth serving programs.

Washington County is not without juvenile delinquency, of course. The day of this field trip, three boys were brought in having been accused of a rash of thefts. Gravatt makes a difference by making a dent, by leaving an impression and counting on parents and teachers and preachers and others to share his commitment.

“He has the ability to communicate with the children,” said Washington Circuit Court Judge **Robert Bennett**, Gravatt’s boss. “It’s not like he’s looking down on them. He just has a knack.”

“The more familiar kids are with you,” Gravatt said, “the more respect they’ll have for you and the system you represent.”

Gravatt corralled these fifth graders in what amounts to the jail’s library/commissary/juvenile wing and purposefully slammed the heavy door. “Any of you see a swimming pool?” he asked. A cluster of heads turned from side to side. “See the trampolines?” Gravatt went on. “Where were the bicycles?” He noted that the students soon would spot the shower without a curtain and a toilet without a door. “Don’t come to jail if you’re modest,” he told them. Gravatt then described a day – any day – in this place. “Most of it is spent sitting and sitting and sitting,” he told the youngsters. “It’s not bad compared to what I would call bad, but it’s not good.”

Gravatt leads hundreds through the jail and many others through an after-school program to curb alcohol and drug use and to instill values.

Arguably more than anyone, he urged into reality a YMCA in Salem. He helped find money for a drug-sniffing dog for the county. He has presided over the County Fair Board and that was him, grilling at a recent community kids’ fest. He seems to be in more places than a politician on the ballot.

“Everybody knows Ernie,” said **Sandy Saulman**, a court reporter for Washington Superior Court, for which Gravatt and his staff also work.

Gravatt, 63, has been on this job for two decades. He arrived here several years before to own and operate a Burger Queen. He had gravitated to fast food after having lost his appetite for his former career. He had been a special education administrator in Louisville, a niche he had settled into first as a teacher in his native Virginia. His road to Salem included stops in South Carolina and Tennessee.

Bennett rescued Gravatt from the restaurant business. He clearly had more to offer than a lunch in a sack. “Ernie’s been a really great asset,” Bennett said. “He’s reached out.”

Gravatt’s caseload averages 175, and he deals with adults as well, lawbreakers to whom he always lends an ear but not necessarily a bleeding heart. Caring need not coincide with cutting slack when Gravatt recommends punishments to judges.

**Brad Johnson**, the attorney for some who are sent Garvatt’s way, calls the probation officer “reasonable.” “Gravatt cares,” Johnson said; “he’s approachable.” Gravatt is content if he’s considered fair after 20 years of often trying tests. Like him; don’t like him; popularity cannot be the goal.

He appreciates each day’s unpredictability just as he realizes that no two cases are quite the same. He does not hide from his decisions, even though in Salem he might not be able to anyway. He said people recognize his car, and at his office there’s only one entrance and exit. “It’s humorous, in a way,” Gravatt said of suggestions that he somehow shield himself.

People ask predictably if Gravatt looks forward to retirement, to more time with Dottie, his wife of 43 years. He responds by complimenting his nice, like-new office near the jail and by bragging on his staff of eight. Besides, Washington County keeps producing children who deserve direction the otherwise might not get. He’ll keep doing all he can for now and apparently for a while.

“I never felt I have had to back up to get my paycheck,” he said.

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