

Happy Trooper from Columbus Calls It A Day

By Becky Shay of the Billings Gazette
Photo by Larry Mayer

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Montana Highway Patrol Sgt. Pete O'Loughlin has an attitude.

After 29 years with the patrol, O'Loughlin has learned to direct that attitude to his advantage. It has kept him safe on the roads, free of ulcers and filled with joy. The secret to his success is a combination of approaching people with respect, staying positive and having fun and, in all things, turning to God.

O'Loughlin will retire on Oct. 26, ending his law enforcement career as the most senior sergeant in the MHP.

He took some time off of the road recently to sit in the MHP Columbus Detachment office and visit about his years as a trooper.

The new office is nestled on Columbus' main street between a counselor's office and a day care. It was a point of pride for O'Loughlin to get his detachment into permanent quarters.

The troopers moved into the office in early September after years of being "cubby-holed here and there, compliments of the county," O'Loughlin said.

O'Loughlin's desire to be in law enforcement goes back to childhood, when



he would ride on wrecker calls with his dad in the Big Sandy area.

He worked as a sheriff's deputy for three years in Big Sandy before joining the patrol.

His first MHP station was in Havre. Just five years into his MHP career, a colleague persuaded O'Loughlin to join him in trying for a promotion. Not sure he was experienced enough to make sergeant but wanting to support his friend, O'Loughlin took the tests. He placed third on the promotion list, and pretty soon the colonel called and asked if O'Loughlin would take the Columbus station.

The O'Loughlin family, with three

children, made the move and the kids fit in quickly, he said.

"We took that as a good sign," he said.

With his seniority, O'Loughlin could have had his choice of stations around the state but said he had a good reason for staying: "We just give it over to the Lord," he said.

His faith has helped O'Loughlin through some difficult times at work, including wrecks where people died.

A stickler for using seat belts, having seen them save numerous lives, O'Loughlin scoffs at Montana's safety belt law. The penalty for nonuse is light - "20 bucks doesn't mean anything," he said - and needs to be increased along with giving law enforcement the authority to stop people for not being buckled in.

"That is the one thing that is killing all our people," O'Loughlin said. "And yet we can't get our legislators to make a law out of it."

Sgt. J.V. Moody, who worked with O'Loughlin from 1994 until he was pro-

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moted to sergeant and moved to Helena this summer, said O'Loughlin was a father figure to him.

Moody said O'Loughlin is probably the most respected sergeant in Montana because of his professionalism and personality.

"I just have the utmost respect for the guy," he said. "He's the best mentor a guy could have, just because of his positive attitude."

Moody said he would have liked to talk O'Loughlin into staying another 10 years so they could retire together. Since that didn't work out, Moody hopes to return to Columbus and fill the slot vacated by O'Loughlin's retirement.

"You could never replace the guy," Moody said. "You could hope to be a good as he was. I hope I can be half as good a sergeant as Pete was and I'd be good."

Trooper Adam Olivas has worked with O'Loughlin since 2000. He said the

sergeant is well-liked by people in the communities in Stillwater County and is known among the MHP and the residents as being a happy and fair guy.

O'Loughlin has been a good boss, Olivas said, who supports his employees and is known to take the brunt of calls when troopers are backed up on paperwork or have sick leave or vacation days.

His most notorious local story occurred in 1997.

"I was the knothed who popped myself on the backside at the jail," O'Loughlin said.

O'Loughlin was reholstering his gun after leaving the jail when it discharged and he was shot in the right thigh. He got a lot of razzing about the incident, but O'Loughlin said that just shows that his co-workers care about him.

"If you get shot, you get tomorrow off," O'Loughlin said he tells troopers. "I got six weeks off, healing time."

O'Loughlin said he has always enjoyed working for the MHP and still does. But it's time to move on, he said.

"You meet the neatest people out there on the road," he said.

For all he will miss, O'Loughlin said the demand to use computers is getting a little ahead of him. Being a trooper has many demands, he said, and "going on 61, it's time to find something a little less strenuous."

"Change is good," he said. "If you look at it in a positive light, it's good. It's that attitude again."


O'Loughlin said he will take some time to be enjoy being retired.

"There'll be something come along," he said. "Nothing serious, just enough to keep me out of trouble."

The O'Loughlins have eight grandchildren and another on the way.

"That, I'm sure, will take up part of my retirement time," he said. □

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