The Prairie Press
PRESENTS

LASTING LEGACIES

2026 AWARD WINNERS

Dear Prairie Press Readers,

Every community has people who make a difference. Individuals whose dedication, leadership and hard work leave a lasting mark on the people and places around them. The Lasting Legacy Award was created to recognize and celebrate those individuals and the contributions they make to our communities.

I am proud to introduce the inaugural class of five Lasting Legacy Award winners. Representing a wide range of fields, including agriculture, healthcare and more.

Although their careers and accomplishments are unique, they share a common thread: a commitment to something bigger than themselves. Their stories are reminders that a true legacy is built through dedication and the lives we impact along the way.

In this special section, we invite you to get to know these five remarkable individuals and celebrate the lasting contributions they have made.

Congratulations to our first-ever Lasting Legacy Award winners. It is an honor to recognize you and share your stories with our readers.

With gratitude,

Victoria Leitch
Publisher

1C.COVER.indd 1 11/16/26 9:28 AM

A gift for your Future

You pick!

6 OR 12 MONTH CD

4.25% APY*

$500 Minimum Deposit

*Annual Percentage Yield



Member FDIC | EQUAL HOUSING LENDER

PROSPECT BANK

THE MINIMUM BALANCE TO OBTAIN THE STATED ANNUAL PERCENTAGE YIELD (APY) OF THIS CERTIFICATE OF DEPOSIT (CD) IS $500.00. APY IS ACCURATE AS OF 11/11/2026. CERTIFICATE WILL AUTOMATICALLY RENEW WITH APPLICABLE RATE AT TIME OF MATURITY. TERMS AVAILABLE ARE SIX OR TWELVE MONTHS. ALTERNATIVE TERMS ARE NOT PERMITTED. FEES OR OTHER CONDITIONS COULD REDUCE EARNINGS ON THE ACCOUNT. A PENALTY MAY OR WILL BE IMPOSED FOR EARLY WITHDRAWAL. OTHER FEES OR RESTRICTIONS MAY APPLY. OFFER ENDS 12/08/2026. PROMOTIONAL RATE MAY REMAIN AVAILABLE AFTER EXPIRATION DATE; CONTACT BANK FOR CURRENT RATE AND AVAILABILITY.



All loans subject to credit approval.

FNB

Tax and accounting services are not FDIC insured.

FIRST NEIGHBOR BANK, N.A.

411 E JASPER ST | PARIS, IL | 217-543-2265 | FirstNeighbor.com

With locations in:
ARTHUR | CASEY | CHARLESTON | GREENUP | MATTOON | NEOGA | NEWMAN | TOLEDO

LENDER Member FDIC

TAX & ACCOUNTING SERVICES
Tax Returns
Financial/Tax Planning
Bookkeeping
Payroll Services
PERSONAL | BUSINESS | FARM

FNB

FIRST NEIGHBOR
TAX & ACCOUNTING

918 IL-49 | CASEY | 217-932-4048
1830 VICTORIA LN | CHARLESTON | 217-345-3010
106 E COLUMBIA ST | ARTHUR | 217-543-2938
223 E 6TH ST | NEOGA | 217-895-3272

Tax and accounting services are not FDIC insured.

CONGRATULATIONS!



Warren Sperry



Joe Vitale



Dr. Marilyn Frey



Craig Smith



Mary Lou Wright

Lasting Legacy Awardees



Pearman PHARMACY
116 West Court Street
Paris, IL
(217) 465-8455
Steve Benefiel R.PH
Denise Allanson, R.PH
Jasmine Bennett, PharmD
Dustin Melton, R.PH.
Charlie Wieland, PharmD
Madelyn J. Brouwer, PharmD

PARIS CLINIC PHARMACY
217-465-4114
In The Horizon Health Paris Clinic
Paris, IL
Justine Bogue PharmD

Joe Vitale: The Heart behind the pizza

BY NOAH JOHNSON
njohnson@prairiepress.net

The man behind Joe's Pizza, Giuseppe "Joe" Vitale, passed away in August 2020, but his legacy lives on through his restaurant, his family, and the lasting impact he had on everyone he met.

Joe wasn't just a restaurateur; he was a husband, a father, a grandfather and so much more. But above all else, he was a kind human being.

"He was the kindest man on earth," daughter Josephine Vitale said.

"He would go (above) and beyond (for) anything us kids needed."

Joe's daughter Josephine Vitale, son Eno Vitale, and granddaughters Pia Krieger and Teresa Temples all spoke about their grandfather; his early life, his life in Paris, and how he impacted not only their lives, but the lives of everyone around him.

Joe was born on Aug. 1, 1941, in the coastal town of Cinisi, Italy.



Special to The Prairie Press
Joe getting ingredients ready before opening.

Eno said his dad had an amazing work ethic, stemming from his childhood when he started working in Cinisi at a young age.

Joe began working at just six years old to help his family, picking lemons and cutting hay for a local farmer.

Eno shared a story about his father trying to cut hay for the farmer, but at six, Joe couldn't cut much hay, especially on his first day.

After Joe finished cutting, he showed the farmer his work, to which the farmer responded, "That's all you've done?"

"So, the next day, he's like, I'm going to show him", Eno recalled.

Joe would come back and cut as much hay as he could and proudly show his work to the farmer, who was able to pick up the pile with one hand.

"He (Joe) was just devastated," Eno said.

"He's like, you know what? I really got to bust my butt in order to make a difference, and he was making a difference ever since."

Joe took that mentality to the United States in 1966 with his best friend and love of his life, his wife, Maria "Pia" Truppiano. The two were married in October of 1964, roughly two years before they moved to the United States.

Eno said the couple decided to come to the States to pursue a better life.

"The American dream, baby," Pia Krieger said.

The couple landed in Des Moines, Iowa, before moving to Sandwich, Ill., and then to Lawrenceville, Ill.

The couple would go back to Italy for a year before returning to the States, eventually finding a home in Paris in 1972.

Eno shared it was an easy decision for his parents to set roots in Paris, saying that as they drove through town looking at houses, the couple knew this was home.

"They just knew that this was where they were supposed to be," Eno said.

He added that his parents immediately felt at home when they moved to Paris – not because it reminded them of Italy – but because of the people.

In 1973, Joe and Pia Vitale decided to bring their family recipes to Paris, opening Joe's Pizza from the lower level of their house south of town.

To this day, customers share stories of going to Joe's at all hours of the night to see if Joe would cook for them.

"My dad would peek out, and the kids would yell up, 'We're hungry'." So, he'd come downstairs and start the ovens and start cooking pizzas for the high schoolers, basically, because that's what they were," Eno said.

"A lot of them still tell us about that," Josephine said.

There's a reason so many people have stories about going to Joe's back in the 70s, 80s, 90s and 2000s, as they not only wanted to see Joe, but to experience his cooking.

"His palate was unbelievable," Eno said.

"He can make anything out of salt and pepper and just a little bit of seasoning, and he was a magician when it comes to cooking. And I strive every day to try to do that."

Cooking was a passion of Joe's, something he not only shared with the community but with his family every week.

Monday was family dinner night in the Vitale home – whether hungry or not – the family all ate together.

"If you were hungry, you told him, 'I could eat a little bit' because then you would get a normal size. But if you weren't hungry, you would say, ' No, I don't want anything' because you still would get a little bit," Temples shared.

"That's just how he was; everything was family-based," Pia Krieger said.

Even at Joe's Pizza, he didn't see the people walking in as customers, but family.

Eno reiterated how passionate Joe was about his food; he didn't just put spices and other ingredients into his dishes; he poured his love into every meal.

"Whether it was home or whether it was here, it was the love that he gave," Eno said.

Joe wasn't cooking for others to receive something in return; he did it because he wanted to take care of others, and he showed that care through his cooking.

"And he was so happy when anybody liked his food," Josephine said.

It wasn't hard to love Joe's cooking, as he could "make rocks taste good," according to Eno.

"We used to say it was in his hands; he had magic hands," Temples said.

Joe wouldn't measure ingredients when cooking – he just knew how much of each spice or component to add.

To this day, that's how the sauce is made at Joe's: no measuring; instead, the family relies on what they saw and learned from Joe.

"I'm very lucky because my hands are as big as my dad's hands, so I knew exactly how to do it," Eno said.

Joe was like an artist when he cooked, knowing exactly what would work and how to use each ingredient.

"He just knew exactly (what to do)," Eno said.

"(He would say) this piece right here needs a mushroom; this one needs a pepperoni. You know, whatever it was. It was just pure, pure love."

Joe also loved to have fun with his family and employees, starting impromptu water fights in the restaurant when it was closing for the evening.

Eno said that everyone would start throwing pitchers of water at each other while Pia Vitale would exclaim, "You're making a mess!"

That was Joe's personality according to the family, a man who enjoyed having fun, loved everybody and wanted to make everyone feel welcome.

Joe not only poured his love into his cooking, but he also poured love into his family.

"He was my best friend. I was always with him, always with him," Eno said.

"To me, he was a role model. He was a dad. He was my best friend."

Pia Krieger said Joe was basically like a father to her and her siblings.

Arguably, Joe loved his wife, Pia Vitale, most of all.

Josephine and Eno described their mom, Pia Vitale, as an amazing woman who kept the peace in the family.

Pia Vitale passed away in May 1999.

Eno shared that his parents got to a point where they wanted to build a new house, but it never came to fruition.

After Pia Vitale passed, Joe decided to build a mausoleum at the cemetery where she was buried.

"He would go there in the morning. That would be his first stop, and then before he would come to work, he would go there again. And then he'd go say good night to her," Eno shared.

It didn't matter how he was feeling or what the weather looked like, Joe would visit his late wife every single day.

"They're what you think about when you think about a perfect relationship," Eno said.

Joe had so much love and passion for his family, his cooking and his restaurant, according to the family.

That love extended further outside of the restaurant and his family, and into the community in Paris.

"He instilled that without community we're nothing. And it doesn't matter whether you own a business or not. Without community and without friends and family, you're nothing. You really are nothing. Because at some point in time, you're going to need somebody to pick you up and dust you off," Eno said.

Joe was not a rich man, but he gave back as much as he could.

"He would take from whatever he had to help," Josephine said.

Whether it was helping someone pay a bill, someone broken down on the side of the road or someone needing help crossing the street – Joe was there to lend a hand.

"Or (at) the grocery store - Some lady needed extra money to pay for her groceries; he didn't have to, and he did," Josephine shared.

Pia Krieger and Josephine said Joe didn't help because he wanted a pat on the back, or an award; he did it because it was the kind thing to do.

"These are our people now. We are blessed enough to be able to give to them as well; that's what we're gonna do," Pia Krieger said of Joe's attitude towards others.

"And never, ever did he take recognition," Josephine said.

The family shared that Joe was always looking to give back to the community, whether that be donations to local schools, organizations, families in need or complete strangers; Joe was always willing to give.

Eno shared that there are things Joe did that he never even knew about until after his passing in 2020.

Eno said multiple people approached him at Joe's funeral, sharing stories of how Joe went out of his way to take care of others.

"He literally had a heart of gold," Pia Krieger said.

"(He was) everyone's protector, everyone's best friend," Temples said.

The Vitale children took over ownership and operations in 1986, still using their family's secret recipes.

1986 was also the year Joe's Pizza moved to its current location on West Court Street in downtown Paris.

Even though Joe retired, he was still very much involved with the business and the community – talking to customers and helping in the kitchen.

Joe was always around, even after an incident where he mangled his hand after accidentally sticking his hand in a pasta roller.

With a crushed hand, Joe drove to a local doctor friend who told him he needed to get to the hospital.

The hospital wasn't sure they could fix his hand, but Joe's friend implored them to try.

"The doctor in town (Joe's friend) was like, 'No, you have to fix his hand. Like, if you knew who he was, he had to have that hand. And they did, Pia Krieger shared.

"Two days later, (he was) back to work, supervising with his cast. He was just a strong person," Josephine said.

Joe's passion, love, dedication and strength live on through his restaurant and his family.

Joe's Pizza recently celebrated its 53rd anniversary, and the Vitales have no plans to leave the business.

"There's always going to be a Vitale inside there," Eno said.

Joe and Pia Vitale had four children together – Josephine Vitale, Eno Vitale, Tony Vitale and Pete Vitale, as well as nine grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.



Special to The Prairie Press
Joe & Pia making fresh tomato sauce in Sicily.



Special to The Prairie Press
Joe with granddaughter, Teresa Temples (2019 Miss Edgar Co.)

Dr. Marilyn Frey: Making room for EVERYONE

BY VICTORIA LEITCH
vleitch@prairiepress.net

Dr. Marilyn Frey has built her life around the belief that everyone deserves to be seen, understood and allowed to succeed.

For Frey, helping others has never been simply a career choice. It is a deeply rooted conviction that began in childhood, grew through decades of education and professional experience, and continues to guide her work and involvement in the Paris community.

Whether through her work in mental health, her commitment to understanding the differences that shape people's lives or her efforts to bring attention to those who are too often forgotten, Frey has remained guided by one central belief: making a difference means including everybody.

"Making a difference and hoping people will continue the difference and understand how important it is to include everybody," Frey said when asked what leaving a legacy means to her. "And to give back, giving back is probably the most important thing to me."

Frey grew up in a hardworking family as the youngest of two daughters. Her father was a businessman, and her family valued education, even when higher education and professional success were not always encouraged for women.

She became the first person in her family to attend college, an accomplishment that would open the door to a lifetime of learning and service.

"I was the first one in my family to go to college," Frey said. "I come from a very hard-working family with a very creative businessman father."

Her path, however, was not without obstacles.

After earning her bachelor's degree, Frey hoped to work in public aid, where she could help people directly. But she encountered an unexpected roadblock: She was not yet 21, the minimum age required for the position she wanted.

Rather than allowing that disappointment to derail her ambitions, she found another way forward. She entered a master's degree program through a Vietnam grant and, before completing her studies, began working for the state's mental health system at the Charles F. Reed Zone Center in Chicago.

It was there that another important opportunity presented itself.

Frey was encouraged to pursue her doctorate, with the state offering to pay for her education and provide time away from work to complete it. She accepted.

At the time, she was one of only two women in her doctoral class.

"I was very lucky," Frey said, reflecting on the opportunities and mentors who helped shape her career.

She earned her doctorate from the Illinois Institute of Technology in December 1971. And in a story that perfectly captures her determination, she completed the journey while nine months pregnant.

One of her favorite memories from that time involves her dissertation committee, which consisted of several men and one woman.

"I walked in, and I jokingly said, 'If you don't pass me, I'm going to drop the baby right now,'" she recalled with a laugh.

Her daughter was born just a couple of weeks after she received her doctorate.

Frey remembers experiencing gender discrimination and favoritism throughout her education and career, experiences that only strengthened her awareness of the barriers people face.

Even as a young child, Frey recognized injustice and felt compelled to protect someone who was being treated unfairly.

"I always wanted to help people," Frey said. "My actual love was cultural anthropology and diversity. From the time I was a little girl, and I'm not sure why, but I always saw how people were discriminated against, and I couldn't handle it, and I had to make a difference."

That instinct never left her.

Although Frey grew up in Chicago, her husband's family had connections to Paris and Kansas, Ill. Through visits to the area in the late 1970s and early 1980s, she began learning about rural communities and recognizing the differences between rural and urban experiences.

At the time, conversations about diversity in higher education frequently centered on gender, sexual orientation, religion and social class. Frey believed another important dimension was being overlooked: the differences between rural and urban life, including the experiences of people living in farming communities compared with those in town.

She began incorporating rural diversity into her classes, and her students responded enthusiastically.

Her belief was straightforward: A professional cannot adequately help someone without first understanding that person's life and circumstances.

"When you're any kind of practicing physician, doctor, doctorate, psychologist, social worker, whatever, you have to understand your patient," Frey said.

That belief continues to influence her work today.

Frey recognized that rural communities often lacked access to the services and specialized resources available in larger metropolitan areas. When she first began serving the Paris area, she said there were very few mental health providers.

Today, she continues to provide specialized assessments, work that requires particular credentials and training and differs from traditional therapy.

"I love it. I love it," she said. "I'm an old-fashioned doctor."

Her commitment to understanding people also extends beyond the walls of her professional office.

For Frey, some of the community's greatest challenges are the ones people would rather not acknowledge.

She speaks openly about the heartbreak she feels when seeing homelessness and the struggles faced by people dealing with circumstances that can leave them isolated, vulnerable and without adequate support.

One area of her professional specialty has been the effects of fetal alcohol exposure and methamphetamine on the brain and behavior. That knowledge has influenced her involvement in organizations and efforts aimed at helping homeless individuals.

She has become particularly concerned with the number of people experiencing homelessness in Paris, saying it is difficult to drive through town and witness the need while knowing that some would prefer to pretend the problem does not exist.

"I could drive to the hospital, or down Jasper Street, and the amount of homeless that I will see, and it's like we want to pretend it doesn't exist, and that's not my style," Frey said.

It is perhaps one of the clearest expressions of her character.

Frey believes that recognizing a problem is the first step toward doing something about it, and she is willing to speak up when she believes people are being overlooked. Her approach is rooted in compassion, but it is also grounded in accountability.

When asked what she hopes people remember most about her, Frey pointed to her compassion for others.

"I hope they look at my professionalism, my issues of wanting to help people, but also wanting people to assume responsibility," she said.

Now, when reflecting on the lessons life has taught her, she returns to the importance of remaining true to oneself.

"How important it is to be true to yourself," Frey said. "And to follow who you are versus being other people's puppets, because sometimes if you're somebody else's puppet, life could be easier."

But easier, she recognizes, does not necessarily mean more meaningful.

When asked whether someone can truly feel fulfilled by taking the easier path at the expense of their own beliefs, Frey was certain.

"No, definitely not," she said.

This lesson is reflected throughout her life. She pursued an education when opportunities for women were limited. She challenged traditional approaches to understanding diversity. She brought attention to the unique needs of rural communities and continues to advocate for people whose circumstances make them easy to overlook.

She has chosen to speak up rather than remain silent and to engage with difficult issues rather than pretend they do not exist.

"I'm very honored by how the community and the hospital treat me and accept me for who I am, and it's very important to me," she said.

For Dr. Marilyn Frey, making a difference has never been about recognition. It has always been about people.

Perhaps the most fitting way to describe the legacy she hopes to leave is in the simple words she returned to throughout our conversation: give back, understand one another, and never stop making room for everybody.





Special to The Prairie Press

Dr. Marilyn Frey playing frisbee with her dog, Albert, in Chicago. Frey later founded Rescue ME Clifford.

Warren Sperry: The band director who got "L☘CKY"

BY BETHANY WAGONER
info@prairiepress.net

Four days before the start of the school year in 1968, Warren Sperry was the brand-new music teacher for Mayo Middle School. Then, the superintendent of Paris High School called him into his office.

As Sperry would soon learn, the high school band director had resigned, and a job at the high school was his, if he wanted it. Despite being brand new to the community, and having other opportunities open to him, the 22-year-old who describes himself as a "bubbly-faced, 130-pound, dripping wet guy with curly-hair" decided to take the job. And he kept it for more than three decades.

"I'm just an average guy that got lucky," Sperry explained. "When I first got the job, I was told, 'There are people who work for 10 years to get this kind of opportunity,' and they weren't wrong. I was just lucky that I had an opportunity to apply ... and I just went in and did what I do, and did what I love. "



Special to The Prairie Press

For decades, Paris knew Warren Sperry as a band director, yet he has poured time and heart into plenty of other pots in his community.

For Sperry, the love started as a love of music, a passion he pursued at Eastern Illinois University, despite encouragement from family and friends to pursue something "more formal." However, his love soon grew to encompass his students, teaching and his new community.

With a degree fresh in his hand and a brand new bride, Sperry began his first day of teaching at the high school, surprising himself and his students.

"I walked in and had to tell them who I was and that I was a teacher, not a student," he explained. "They were all used to a certain style (of music), but I was influenced by Ohio State and Texas A&M. I was a nerd. They were used to a gentleman who had years of maturity and understanding, and I looked younger than most of the students."

However, according to Sperry, it was the Tigers he taught that ultimately shaped his teaching style and helped him to grow as an educator and person.

"I learned to listen and follow instructions ... and we, together, learned what success was in our eyes," Sperry said of the students, noting that he also learned from the staff members at the school who took him under their wings. "I learned to learn from people who had experience that I did not, and when it came time to teach, I taught. I learned how to develop lesson plans, how to articulate, evaluate and grade. I learned a lot from the other teachers."

"I also learned about them, and how they taught. In turn, they really learned a lot about me and how I directed," he added. "I was received partially, only by the fact that they liked what they saw and what they heard. There was also the old guard, and no one wanted to break away from that, so I really learned to implement that too, and I learned to embrace it, and then to enhance it."

Under Sperry's direction, the Paris Marching Tigers developed into more than just a band; they integrated a new level of showmanship, changing school spirit in town and eventually growing the band, nearly tripling it in size over the next three decades.

"When you make change, you make it in slow movements, gradually," he explained. "I was more into entertainment than music. I taught music, I taught the fundamentals, but then I took the fundamentals and turned them into music, and then the music turned into entertainment."

"We were showy," Sperry said.

As the years went on, Sperry's Tigers were selected to perform at events as prestigious as the Aloha Bowl in Honolulu, Hawaii, Orange Bowl Parade, Sugar Bowl Parade, Peach Bowl Parade, Indy 500 Parades and the Presidential Inaugural Parade in Washington, D.C. They were also invited by the Chicago Bears and the St. Louis Cardinals to perform in their halftime shows and were featured in the Chicago Daily News and listed among the top 100 bands in the nation by the National Association of Music Manufacturers and the Music Educators National Conference.

His achievements in education have led him to receive the Allen D. Albert Award (Rotary Club's Citizens of the Year Award), the Outstanding Young Educator Award, the Education is the Key Award from the Regional Office of Education and induction into the Honorable Order of Kentucky Colonels.

For the band director, his time in the music classroom, and eventually serving as the assistant principal at Mayo Middle School, was always about building more than just a show. His intention was always to grow the students and to preserve the musical craft for the next generation.

"I had people in my band who had no advantages and then people who had all the advantages, and they were all the same on the field; there was nobody any different than anybody else," Sperry said. "You were judged by what you were and the potential in your body, and it wasn't me who changed that, or found that either; they found the avenue to do it, I just gave them the venue."

Despite his 1989 induction into the National High School Band Directors Hall and his Eastern Illinois University Lifetime Achievement Award, Sperry insists that he is not the reason that the Paris High School band saw success during his 30-year career, or that he is any more deserving of recognition than any other educator.

"I only got lucky to get the job... the people who built the Paris High School band in all these years were not Warren Sperry. It was Jim Bellerud, Joe Gill, the Crestwood music teachers and all the elementary school music teachers ... they produced a product," Sperry said. "When I got them, I put a ribbon on them and put them out there."

"I can tell you right now, Kevin Pruitt and Jessica Hendrickson are doing a knockout job," he added. "When it comes to musical talent and ability, I can't hold a candle to them."

Sperry's involvements have also reached far beyond the walls of the high school and the football field. He served as a board member for the Paris Community Hospital, YMCA, Edgar County Chapter of the American Red Cross and Paris Area Chamber of Commerce. He is a member of the Masonic Prairie Lodge, Edgar County Shrine Club, Friends of Paris Community Hospital (Horizon Health), Paris Early Riser Kiwanis Club and the First Christian Church.

He has led the church choir, directed the Paris Municipal Band and coached for the Paris Junior League. He has also served as a judge for the IAAF Talent Competition and State Fair Queen Pageant, as well as many other county fair queen pageants.

In 1996, he stepped into his role on the Edgar County Community Foundation, a position he still holds today and calls one of his "favorite places to be."

"Paris has always been family, more than it has ever been a job. I want to see it succeed and I want to see it continue to grow and produce good," he said. "I refer to my former students as my kids, and that is who they are ... This community has raised me and has given me reason and purpose. It's been my honor to serve and get involved in everything that I can."

"I don't feel obligated (to serve) or to be involved. I feel privileged to have the joy of doing it. I have fun here, I have fun going around town and visiting all of the banks and the businesses, because I see people that I know and I get to sit and talk with them. It's really the people that have made here, Paris, home."

Over the years, Sperry has been recognized for his overall devotion to the welfare of others, receiving the Paris Area Chamber of Commerce Parisian of the Year Award, the FFA Forever Blue & Gold Award, the Vandalia Distinguished Alumni Award, the Prairie Lodge No. 77 Community Builder Award and now, the Lasting Legacy Award.

Despite the accolades and shelf of trophies the Band Director insists that he does not need, or deserve, the praise.

"My success in music was not the number of times I succeeded and wrote a piece of music; most of them ended up in the trash," he said. "I just walked in and did what I loved. I am honored that people responded well to it, but all I have done is love a community back."

It is the people who have supported the former band director and assistant principal that he believes "should get this award," insisting that the educators, principals, his friends and family members deserve far more recognition. Most especially, he believes the woman who has stood by his side is the real reason for any success he has had.

"People are afraid of failure, but failure is a prime ingredient to success, and if I had to do it all over again 10 times, I would," he said. "The things that have made me what I am, and given me the ability to succeed at all, are faith, family and her (Jody Sperry.) Her indelible direction and support through all of my life have made me."



Special to The Prairie Press

Warren Sperry, center, "asseses the troops," as he would say, during a PHS band performance at Allen Field in Paris.



Special to The Prairie Press

Warren Sperry, right, pictured with his wife Jody, left. Warren credits most of his success and fulfilled life to Jody and "luck."

Mary Lou Wright: The neighbor every community needs

BY VICTORIA LEITCH
vleitch@prairiepress.net

If there is one thing Mary Lou Wright has learned after a lifetime in Edgar County, it is that a community doesn't take care of itself.

Someone has to organize the fair. Someone has to keep the traditions alive. Someone has to volunteer, lend a hand, give back and make sure the things that make a place special don't disappear.

And, more often than not, Wright has been one of those people.



Special to The Prairie Press

Mary Lou Wright, left, pictured with Senator Chapin Rose, right, when he recently recognized her hard work and the dedication of the new Mary Lou Wright Horse Barn at the Edgar County Fairgrounds.

As president of the Edgar County Fair Board, Wright has dedicated decades to an event that brings generations of families together each summer. But the fair is only one chapter in a much larger story of community involvement that has included everything from helping establish the Honeybee Festival to serving on local boards, supporting public safety efforts, donating blood and rehabilitating injured wildlife.

Wright has never been particularly interested in making a production out of any of it.

"Somebody has to do all this stuff," Wright said.

It is a simple explanation for a lifetime of service, and perhaps the best way to understand why Wright has become such a familiar and dependable presence throughout the county.

Wright's roots in Paris run deep. Born and raised in the community, Wright spent the early years of life in a home located where the city building parking lot is now. Wright's father was a dentist, and around the age of 14, Wright moved to the family farm, where life has remained centered ever since.

The farm has been more than a place to live. It has been a responsibility, a livelihood and a connection to generations of family history.

The property has been in the family for more than 150 years, and Wright has spent much of adulthood helping maintain its legacy. That has included raising cattle, working in the farming operation and spending more than 50 years in the purebred cattle business.

There has also been plenty of time spent around horses.

Wright enjoyed horseback riding, trail riding and horse shows, interests that eventually helped create a lifelong connection to the Edgar County Fair.

That connection began with a relatively simple job: taking tickets at the grandstand.

Wright became involved with the fair while still young, having already developed an interest in horses through 4-H and personal riding experiences. When an opportunity arose to help time the horse races, Wright traded the ticket booth for a stopwatch.

"They had somebody out there, and they needed some timers, so I gave up the tickets to start timing racehorses," Wright recalled.

Wright continued timing the races for several years. Then, when the person overseeing horse racing passed away just a couple of months before the fair, organizers needed someone to step in.

"They recruited me to be in charge of those races," Wright said.

And Wright stayed.

That willingness to step into a position when someone was needed eventually grew into years of leadership, including serving as president of the Edgar County Fair Board.

The responsibilities have changed over the years, but Wright's appreciation for the fair and the people who make it possible has not.

In fact, Wright is quick to point out that the fair's success has never belonged to one person.

When people compliment Wright on the work done at the fair, the response is usually an effort to share the credit.

"Well, I'm just the president," Wright said. "If it wasn't for everybody on the board, you know, that fair wouldn't be a success."

This perspective reflects the way Wright approaches community service as a whole. Leadership, in Wright's eyes, isn't about standing at the front of the room and taking credit. It is about working alongside others and making sure the job gets done.

And there have been plenty of jobs.

Wright has served as an auxiliary deputy and chaired the sheriff's merit board. There was time spent on the YMCA board before the construction of its current facility, as well as service as a board member and stockholder with State Bank of Chrisman.

When the Honeybee Festival was getting its start, Wright worked alongside others to help establish the event at the fairgrounds.

Wright also worked with participants in the local work camp, helping provide projects and activities around the fairgrounds while giving those individuals an opportunity to contribute to the community.

For years, Wright regularly donated blood, starting in high school. It was a commitment that continued until taking blood thinners made further donations impossible.

"I miss doing it because I think that's important," Wright said.

"I think it's just important if you're going to live in the community to help support the community."

Wright credits family members, particularly a grandmother who lived to be 104, with demonstrating the value of hard work and perseverance. The grandmother and her husband maintained the family farm through the Great Depression, a time when keeping a household and agricultural operation afloat required determination and everyone's willingness to pitch in.

Wright's mother offered another example of that same determination. After her husband passed away, she went back to school later in life and earned her licensed practical nurse license.

"She was a hard worker too," Wright said.

Those examples helped establish a mindset that has carried through Wright's life: difficult circumstances are not a reason to quit, and everyone has a part to play.

Wright also credits good neighbors with making a difference, recalling the Tuckers and Mosses as people who could be counted on whenever help was needed.

That sense of neighborliness is something Wright believes communities must continue to protect. It is also something Wright worries is becoming more difficult to maintain as younger generations find themselves pulled in more directions.

Still, Wright hopes younger residents will recognize that local traditions and community organizations survive only when people are willing to participate.

"It's important to get involved in your community to help do things to keep it going," Wright said.

For years, Wright has quietly rehabilitated wildlife, including raising deer and squirrels.

It is an interest that many people who know Wright through the fair or farming operation may never have known about.

"I used to rehab a lot of wildlife," Wright said. "I've enjoyed probably doing that, rehabbing deer, and I've raised a lot of deer and squirrels."

Wright's years of involvement have not gone entirely unnoticed. Among the recognitions received over the years are being named Parisian of the Year by the Paris Area Chamber of Commerce and receiving the Illinois County Fair Person of the Year award.

"Awards don't mean anything to me," Wright laughed.

The recognition is appreciated, but it has never been the reason for getting involved.

No one person builds a community, and Wright has never pretended otherwise.

There is no elaborate philosophy behind the decades of volunteering, no complicated explanation for why Wright continues to show up. The answer is rooted in the same values passed down through generations of family: work hard, help your neighbors and don't leave everything for someone else to do.



Special to The Prairie Press

Mary Lou Wright was named one of the 2016 Illinoisan of the Day at the Illinois State Fair.



Craig Smith: Building *more* than a city

BY NOAH JOHNSON
njohnson@prairiepress.net

While it may be Paris City Mayor Craig Smith's last year in office, his service to the community will be a lasting legacy.

Smith currently serves as Mayor of the City of Paris, in what will be his final term after his initial election in 2003.

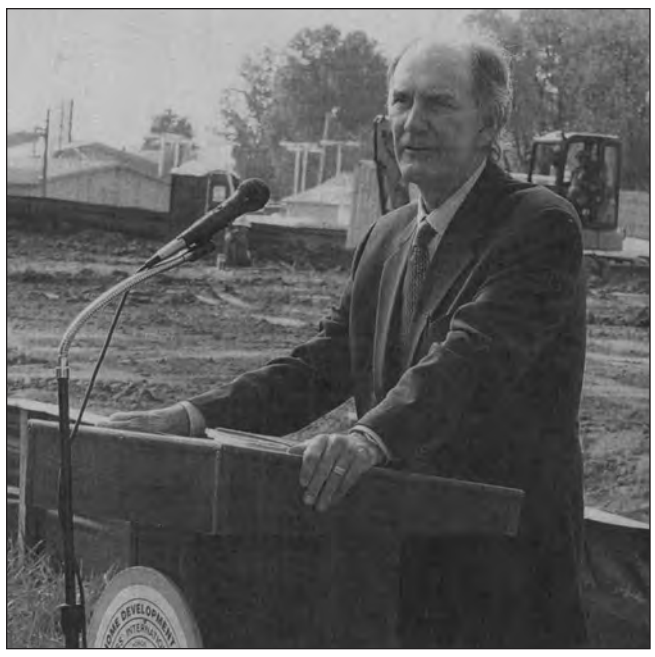
"It's time to turn it over to someone else," he said.

While not born in Paris, Smith has called Paris his home since 1958.

He was born in Lexington, Ky., in 1949, where he lived until he was in first grade.

He and his family moved to Sanford, N.C., for a couple of years before his father got a job at the Illinois Cereal Mill and moved to Paris in 1958 when Smith was nine years old.

Smith attended Memorial



Special to The Prairie Press
Paris Mayor Craig Smith speaks during the groundbreaking of the Maple Ridge II apartment complex.

Elementary School and then Mayo Middle School before graduating from Paris High School (PHS) where he was president of the student council and captain of the 66-6 basketball team.

College life took Smith back down south, where he attended the University of Alabama, earning a bachelor's degree in commerce and business, graduating in 1971, after completing the ROTC program.

Smith joined the United States Army, serving for eight years in active duty and the reserves as a Military Policeman until 1979, finishing as captain.

While in the Army, Smith attended Samford University – Cumberland School of Law, pursuing a career as an attorney, a career path he knew he wanted to take.

He was interested in politics and law since the eighth grade. His uncle was a lawyer and Commonwealth Attorney in Lexington, Ky., and his career as a lawyer always fascinated Smith. While enrolled in law school, Smith got his first taste of politics when he was elected as the first Vice President of the Law Student Division of the American Bar Association.

In 1975, Smith came back to Paris, where he got to try his hands at something he always wanted to do – litigation.

"I wanted to pick a jury. I wanted to do litigation, and so when I graduated from law school, I got a call from Jack Asher, who was my mentor here at the firm, indicating that he heard that I was thinking about it," Smith explained.

Smith interviewed and got the job; it was not only a full-circle moment for Smith to come back and practice law in Paris, but it was also a great opportunity to hit the ground running in litigation.

"And he promised me within three months of getting admitted to the Illinois Bar Association that I would be able to do litigation. Unlike large firms in big cities, you work there for maybe five years before you ever go to trial, and with me, within three months, I was picking my first jury," he explained.

In 1978, Smith became the first public defender for both Edgar and Clark County.

"Before that, the judges would appoint lawyers to individual cases for people who could not afford a defense counsel," Smith explained.

"Most of the time, I was doing litigation, doing jury trials in Edgar and Clark County for almost three years of public defender work, and at the time I was doing the public defender work, I was still doing my private practice with the firm."

As a public defender, Smith tried various tough cases involving murder, armed robbery, kidnapping and more.

"We did a bunch of cases here. We probably tried in those three years just as a public defender, 20 to 25 jury trials," he said.

Smith resigned from his public defender position in 1980 as the private law firm continued to grow.

In 1979, Smith became a partner at the firm.

He's worked with numerous individuals who went on to become successful lawyers and judges. He is currently the sole lawyer at the firm, but he's hopeful to get the next generation involved.

"I have a grandson who's a freshman in law school. I hope he comes back. I have a granddaughter who's considering law school. I hope she comes back. So, I'm hoping that we're going to get some more young blood back in town in the legal profession," he said.

Since then, Smith's firm has primarily focused on civil litigation cases such as personal injury and workers' compensation.

He also serves as a certified civil mediator for lawyers across the country.

"I get contacted by lawyers literally all over the United States, but primarily in Illinois and Chicago, East St. Louis, Springfield, Champaign, down around Carbondale; they call me to be a mediator, and through mediation about 90 percent of cases are settled now before they go to trial because of the mediation system we have now," Smith explained.

As if Smith wasn't busy enough with his growing firm, he decided to take a run at public office, announcing his bid for mayor of Paris in 2002.

"In 2002, I became concerned about the way the city was moving as far as economic development, and the main thing that I was concerned about was water source," Smith said.

"A lot of people don't realize that you cannot have economic business growth without a solid supply of water."

He explained that the city previously used Twin Lakes as the primary source of water.

Smith was concerned that if the city continued using the lakes, potential businesses would look elsewhere to provide services.

"Our position was that we don't want to get surface water to be our sole source of water. We need to find some other source of water," Smith said.

When Smith was elected, he got to work on finding a new water source.

He approached the State of Indiana, speaking before the Indiana Department of Natural Resources Commission with his plan to bring a new water source to Paris.

"I said, 'If you all would let us grab this water and from your state, wherever we bring it over, whatever little communities we touch, we will provide them with free fire suppression, water, whatever they need.' If they wanted to hook in where they didn't have water, they could hook in," Smith explained.

The department agreed, and the treatment plant was established in Indiana.

"It's an aquifer that will, in your lifetime, your kids' lifetime and their lifetime, will never run out. If we had stayed on the surface water, there were many summers where you could almost walk across Twin Lakes and not get deeper than your waist," Smith explained.

Recently, Illinois held a blind taste test for all municipalities and Paris' water was voted best tasting water in Illinois.

Another goal for Smith was to establish a second Tax Increasing Financing (TIF) to help local small businesses grow. He would be successful in implementing the Jasper Street TIF.

"We've done probably through our two TIFs, I would imagine. that we have helped around 75 separate businesses with financial help, and the TIFs allow us to give money to businesses based upon renovation of old buildings; it can't be new construction, but it can be infrastructure," Smith explained.

The TIFs helped multiple large businesses get established as well as expand, including the Hampton Inn, North American Lighting (NAL), GSI and Simonton.

"We've also done anything along Jasper Street, any kind of businesses along there. We've helped them. So, we've done a lot through our TIF, and we've done a lot through economic development," Smith said.

Both TIFs were recently extended with downtown TIF extended another 10 years and the downtown TIF extended for 14 more years.

Another accomplishment Smith is proud of is the enactment of three affordable housing developments – Maple Ridge I, Maple Ridge II and the Tiger Senior Apartments – formerly the old high school.

"Paris is known throughout Springfield as one of the best communities for the establishment of affordable housing, and we're the example of how you do it," Smith said.



Noah Johnson/The Prairie Press
Paris Mayor Craig Smith in the Asher & Smith office in Paris.

Other accomplishments since Smith took office include: negotiating with the state to take possession of the Ed Jenison Minimum Prison to house the 1544th so they could remain in Paris; establishing a drug task force with the Paris Police Department and the Edgar County Sheriff's Department; developing an intergovernmental agreement to transfer over $3,000,000 to assist District #95 in building the current Paris Fine Arts Center; developing a plan to identify old and dilapidated buildings, acquire the title, demolish, and place on the market. Since 2020, 190 structures were demolished; traded real estate with First Federal & Trust to ensure First Federal would expand and remain in Paris; increased funds for police and fire pension funds and more.

Smith has also served as director of the Paris Junior Chamber of Commerce; director of the Paris Chamber of Commerce; director and chairman of Paris United Way; director of the Paris Gymnastic Association; director of First National Bank in Georgetown; president of the Edgar County Humane Association; director and president of the Paul Warner Animal Rescue; and attorney for Paris Township.

Smith will call it a mayoral career in May 2027, but he will still be active in his firm and the community.

"I'm going to continue my law practice; I'm going to enjoy my grandchildren that I have. I just won't be going to four meetings a month and the other mayoral duties," Smith said.

He added that he feels comfortable passing the baton to the next mayor, saying whoever ends up in his seat will have a great team in place from the city administrative staff to fire department to the police department to the department superintendents.

"It's in the right hands. It's in super hands," he said.

Smith lives in Paris with his wife, Hellie, whom Smith called the "rock" of the family.

The couple has four kids together: Zach, Hunter, Hillary and Caslon and nine grandchildren. Smith and his wife plan to do things they enjoy, such as golf, exercise, animal rescue and support their grandchildren at local activities.

Smith also plans to continue to support Hellie and her organization, Paul Warner Animal Rescue, a 501(c)(3) charity that is a network of volunteers and foster homes dedicated to helping fund veterinary care or rehabilitation for animals who were abused, neglected or injured.

Smith said he and his wife will remain in Paris and continue to support the community.

"We love it here. It's a great community. I love seeing how it's changed and how it's evolved," Smith said.



Special to The Prairie Press
Paris Mayor Craig Smith and former Illinois senator and United States President Barack Obama at a town hall meeting in Paris in spring 2007.