

# Marion County DA reflects on career

WHITNEY M. WOODWORTH  
STATESMAN JOURNAL

When Marion County District Attorney Walt Beglau first took office in 2004, a methamphetamine epidemic was gripping the nation, the Great Recession was still a few years away, as was the first iPhone.

Marion County had 37,000 fewer people. Facebook had just launched.

And, Beglau joked, he had a lot more hair.

After 13 years in office, Beglau recently announced he would not seek reelection in 2018. Instead, he has thrown his support behind Paige Clarkson, one of his senior deputy district attorneys.

"It's been really rewarding, and hopefully, I've served the community well," he said, adding that he has "boundless hope" for the office.

Beglau moved from Washington state to Salem in 1986 to attend Willamette University's law school. He and his wife Helen Cooper, an assistant U.S. attorney, raised their son and daughter in South Salem, where the couple still lives.

Beglau recently sat down with the Statesman Journal to reflect on his tenure. His comments have been edited for length and clarity:

**Why did the thrice-elected prosecutor choose to step aside?**

"I've always felt that ... there would come a point in time where I would feel like I should move on," Beglau said. "I'm starting to feel that."

After more than a decade in office, now seems like the right time to let new leadership take the wheel.

**How did he come to be Marion County district attorney?**

Beglau joined the district attorney's office in 1988 as a law clerk while he attended Willamette University College of

Law. He graduated the next year and eventually became a prosecutor, handling cases ranging from child abuse and murder to misdemeanors and property crime.

When former Marion County District Attorney Dale Penn left office in 2004, he named Beglau as his successor, much to the relief of his colleagues, according to a 2004 Statesman Journal article, which described Beglau as an even-tempered, respected office "nice guy."

He began his time as district attorney wanting to focus on violent crimes, especially child abuse and domestic violence. He also sought to fight the explosion in methamphetamine production, distribution, and addiction in the community.

**What cases stand out from his time as a prosecutor?**

He said it's tempting to cite headline-grabbing murder cases as the most tragic, but as he's learned as a prosecutor, there's tragedy everywhere. Sometimes the lesser known cases can radically change someone's life.

A misdemeanor child neglect case helped him realize how much methamphetamine was destroying the community. An addicted mother had abandoned her young girl alone in a motel room to go get drugs.

"It was one of those watershed moments, where you recognize: we got something so evil it will cause a mother to abandon her child," Beglau said. "So from that point forward ... those years of dealing with methamphetamine, the meth strike force, homegrown labs and kids being taken into care, all that for me was set in motion by a misdemeanor."

**What accomplishments have been most important?**

Beglau said he's proud to have led the office as it refocused to address mental health, addiction and child abuse.

Since adding an "aid and assist" prosecutor in January to help defendants with mental illness get the right kind of treatment, the number of people being held for aid and assist at the Oregon State Hospital declined from more than 30 to 10.

Adding the position wasn't only about getting people out of the state hospital, he said, it was about getting people the right kind of treatment with the right kind of community support.

"Community" is a reoccurring theme with Beglau. Big changes like charging possession-level drug offenders with misdemeanors instead of felonies and helping those experiencing mental health crisis require collaboration among law enforcement, prosecutors, health officials, volunteers, and civilians.

Simply not charging drug offenders with a felony won't change much, he said. But getting those addicted to drugs into mandatory treatment and connected with the community will.

**What difficulties arose during his tenure?**

The meth epidemic was just one of the difficult issues that arose during his tenure as district attorney.

A man crashed his pickup into the Marion County Courthouse and set several fires, displacing 200 workers and closing the courthouse for months while it underwent \$13 million in repairs.

Repairs to Courthouse Square also left his office in limbo. And a wave of heroin and opioid addiction hit the area.

The Woodburn bombing case drew national attention as the area mourned two fallen police officers. The 2008 bombing at the West Coast Bank in Woodburn killed an Oregon State Police trooper and Woodburn police captain and maimed the Woodburn police chief.

The ensuing investigation led to the arrest of Bruce Turnidge and his son Joshua Turnidge. The Turnidges' trial lasted almost two months and attracted massive public attention. Both were found guilty, sentenced to death and remain on death row due to the state's ongoing moratorium on executions.

"That was probably one of the most difficult and tragic experiences our community has ever been through," Beglau said.

**Why are district attorneys important?**

District attorneys play a major role in making sure justice is served and issues like police-involved shootings are transparent. He's worked on setting public safety policy with the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission and advocated for issues before the Legislature.

Decision-making is a vital part of leading the district attorney's office. He's been tasked with hiring new prosecutors and deciding whether to seek the death penalty in nearly 25 aggravated murder cases.

"It's been a rewarding career, and 'doing the right thing' has always been our motto," Beglau said. "That needs to be protected and preserved for whoever is privileged of being in this position."

**What comes next?**

Beglau's term won't end until his successor is sworn in January 2019.

He said he's not sure what the future will bring for him. When asked about whether he would seek another public office, he replied that he wasn't sure.

"There are no plans yet," he said. "No second act has been designed."

For questions, comments and news tips, email reporter Whitney Woodworth at [wwoodworth@statesmanjournal.com](mailto:wwoodworth@statesmanjournal.com), call 503-399-6884 or follow on Twitter @wwoodworth

# Parents can help teenage drivers stay focused on road

NIKKI COLEMAN  
SPECIAL TO THE APPEAL TRIBUNE

Teen drivers in Oregon face several challenges this time of year. Fog, slick road conditions, and it's getting dark earlier each evening. Add distractions like talking to passengers or texting to the mix, and driving can end in tragedy.

Since Oregon's tough new distracted driving law kicked in October 1st, parents should take this opportunity to talk with young drivers about distracted driving and perhaps look at their own habits.

A driver's license is a rite of passage into adulthood for many teens. However, they're inexperienced, and not as responsible with cars as adults might be. There are numerous dangers to consider, from speed to alcohol, but helping teens avoid distractions while they're in the driver's seat is a major concern.

Many experts say distracted driving among teenagers is an "epidemic" and sobering statistics back them up. First, nearly half of all teens will be involved in a traffic accident before they graduate high school according to the National Safety Council.

Over the past five years, 56 Oregonians died and hundreds of others suf-

fered serious injuries in traffic accidents involving teen drivers according to the Oregon Department of Transportation. AAA's Foundation for Traffic Safety discovered that distractions such as using smartphones and chatting with passengers while driving are linked to almost six out of ten teen crashes.

Distracted driving means anything that diverts the driver's attention off the road. A study by Oregon State University of young inexperienced drivers reported that glancing away from the road for two seconds or longer can increase the accident risk up to 24 times.

Besides smartphones, other distractions are fairly low-tech. Interacting with passengers, adjusting climate controls, fumbling for things in a glove box, applying make-up, eating or drinking, and looking at something on the side of the road can all sidetrack a driver's concentration.

A 2017 survey of high schoolers by Students Against Destructive Decisions and Liberty Mutual found 71% of seniors use a phone while driving.

Young drivers may think it's okay to use their phones while driving because their friends do the same thing. Grownups have also become dependent on

their phones.

The message for teen drivers? Whatever is happening on the phone is not worth risking your life or the lives of others. Leading researchers agree, parents are the number one influence on teen driving behavior. Here are a few suggestions for parents to help drive the message home:

**Communication is a two-way street:** It's important not to lecture but give teens a chance to share concerns about driving. Start the conversation about distracted driving even before children reach driving age.

**Lead by example:** Parents should be good role models, demonstrating safe driving practices.

**Ride-along:** Teens benefit when parents ride along, coaching teens through various challenges and offering advice to adjust driving habits. Parents should let their teens drive if they're going somewhere together and suggest helpful driving tips.

**Rules of the road:** Establish clear rules, such as no cellphones. If teens need to take their smartphone in the car, ask them to turn it off and make it inaccessible while driving. Families can draft a parent-teen driving contract to support distraction-free driving rules.

The agreement should outline consequences for breaking the rules and should be displayed near the family car keys or on the refrigerator.

**Accountability with technology:** There are several apps to track driving habits based on a teen's phone usage. Using positive incentives to drive changes in behavior, these apps often reward points for distraction-free trips.

Another motivation for teens to pay attention to the road is Oregon's new law, making it illegal to drive while holding any kind of electronic gadget. This rule comes with a \$1,000 maximum fine for first-time offenders. Anyone under 18 can't even use hands-free devices and DMV could take away their driving privileges for certain violations.

So, for parents who have teens driving into the next chapter of their lives - don't be surprised if they pull over and send you a text that says TTYL (Talk To You Later) the next time you need to reach them in the car!

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