

Remembering Bruce McNair

By Scott Laird

Former Vernonia City Councilor Bruce McNair was a true Vernonian – a logger by profession, and a City leader known for his brusque manner, but also for his love for family and friends, and his intense dedication to his community. He was a complex man with a straightforward manner – you always knew where you stood with Bruce – who could be hard to like at times. Bruce McNair passed away on July 17 after a fairly short illness, and Vernonia will certainly miss him.

Bruce was our neighbor across C Street when I first moved to Vernonia in 2003. We often had long conversations in front of our houses, standing for an hour or more discussing current events, politics, and life in Vernonia. In 2007, when I started *Vernonia's Voice*, Bruce came to me early on and told me, if I was going to publish a newspaper about Vernonia I needed to learn about the logging industry. He generously offered to take me out with him to a logging site where he was working. He took the day off from work to explain the processes, the equipment, and the differing jobs. He was knowledgeable and really wanted me to fully understand what loggers do when they work in the woods. I published my article "A Day in the Life of a Logger" in the August 2008 issue of the Voice.

Over the years, our "driveway chats" continued. I learned Bruce was a voracious reader with a keen mind and nuanced opinions, with a sharp understanding of government policy and history. While we often disagreed on many issues, he could run circles around me when we talked about national politics and his knowledge of history was almost encyclopedic. I know he loved to read books, and loaned me a few, but he also really seemed to enjoy the access the internet gave him to new sources of information.

Once he told me about a political speech a 28 year old Abraham Lincoln gave to the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois in 1838. He said he had heard about this speech for years and was excited that he had finally located it on the web and had a chance to read the text in its entirety. He suggested I read it too, because there was a specific point he thought I should understand. I had never heard of the Young Men's Lyceum, but I remember find-

ing the speech and struggling my way through it. That interaction with Bruce left an impression on me – this was a guy who knew and understood things I had never considered.

Sometime around 2006 I was serving on the City Budget Committee and suggested to Bruce that he apply for an open seat. I thought his sharp mind and his long-standing interest in Vernonia would be a great asset to the City. Bruce was initially reluctant – he thought he wasn't the kind of guy who could serve on a City Committee. Eventually he did apply and ended up serving there for the next decade.

Let me take a step back here. I didn't know Bruce in his younger years, but I do know what he told Kate and me during our many conversations. Bruce was a hard drinker and a fighter, he could be mean, and he felt he wasn't a very good person. He acknowledged these things in a frank and honest way, and said he was trying to put that past behind him and be a better man.

After serving on the Budget Committee, Kate and I encouraged Bruce in 2011 to apply for one of three openings on the Vernonia City Council. Again, Bruce was hesitant, but he did apply, and from a group of eight candidates, he was one of the top three choices for a seat, selected by a large citizen panel. He fulfilled an existing term, was again appointed to fill an open seat in 2015, was elected to a seat outright in 2016, and then lost his bid for re-election in 2020.

Bruce told me directly that, as an elected official, he was trying to make up for his checkered past by serving and giving back to the community he loved.

He was responsible in part, as the Council Liaison to the Public Works Committee, for the City's decision to evaluate water and sewer rates, which ended up in a \$17 decrease in rates for city utility customers. He made the continued operation of the struggling Vernonia Memorial Cemetery a personal mission, and helped put that City asset on firm financial ground; he also helped organize the annual Memorial Day celebration, often spending the afternoons and evenings during the prior week making sure everything looked good. He continued to work on the City Budget as a Councilor, and his extensive knowledge of City finances has been

an asset. He was a strong supporter of City Administrator Josette Mitchell, who brought much needed stability to City Hall after years of turmoil. His insistence that an issue be fully discussed often led to extended evening Council meetings, even though he had to get up in just a few short hours for his logging job. After he lost the election last year, he again stepped forward for the community, volunteering to serve on the Planning Commission, and Budget and Cemetery committees.

Bruce's accomplishments as a City Councilor were many, but they often weren't easy. Bruce could be difficult and opinionated, rude and dismissive, and hardheaded when conducting City business. He often played devil's advocate in Council meetings, bringing up situations or solutions, not because he was recommending them, but because he wanted to make sure every angle had been covered, which could be tiresome at times. I'm sure City staff could share hours of stories about how he made their lives difficult. But you also had to respect his knowledge, how seriously he took his position as a City Councilor, the hard work he put into researching and understanding the issues he was asked to decide on, the way he always tried to put what was best for the citizens of the community at the heart of his decisions, and the way he tried to improve himself and be a better Councilor and a better person.

Over his years on Council, he

grew as a City leader, learned to recognize or admit his faults, adjust his style, and soften his personal approach toward his fellow Councilors and City staff.

In May Bruce called me and we had a discussion about the current City Council and how they were conducting business; in a rare moment we agreed with each other. Then, just a few days before Memorial Day, Bruce knocked on my front door – he had been up at the cemetery preparing, and asked if I could post the Memorial Day ceremony on Facebook. I later told Kate he looked terrible – thin face, pale skin, haggard. We didn't even know he was sick. I told Kate, "Bruce is dying," and that's the last time I saw him.

Bruce was a complicated man with a rough past who became a respected leader. He was candid and direct, had a deep love for his family and friends, and an uncommon generosity. One thing he always was, was himself.

Over the years when he was our neighbor, Kate also often talked with Bruce. She found him honest and courageous in the way he faced life. She would often come inside from one of those long conversations and say "I don't know why, but I love Bruce so much."

And that's where I'll end this remembrance of Bruce McNair. Bruce was sometimes a guy that could be hard to like, but was easy to love.



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