

Officer Revels In Fast-Paced Job

Mayor Uses Humor To Smooth Over Bumps

EAST ST. LOUIS

CITY ON THE

EDGE

PART 3

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Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

Photographs By Odell Mitchell Jr.

Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

Carl E. Officer, low in the seat and in white shirt sleeves, was at the wheel of a dented, blue squad car, the lights flashing as he threaded a zigzag path through the evening rush-hour traffic crawling along Interstate 64.

Rolling through red traffic signals and stop signs, alternately punching the accelerator and brake pedal, Officer, the mayor of East St. Louis, was performing a job that most public officials leave to their police departments. With a bodyguard nicknamed Pit Bull riding shotgun, Officer was answering a peace-disturbance call and loving every minute of it.

The mayor arrived at a Baptist church where a heavysset woman in the congregation was loudly argu-

ing with the pastor. The dispute involved the woman's son.

Pointed fingers and obscenities were flying as Pit Bull lumbered over. A thick-necked gentleman, he sported a shaved, gleaming skull and carried a .45-caliber automatic; the pistol's black handle peeked from under the back of his bowling jacket. His calming influence was magical; the argument quickly ended.

Through it all, Officer stood by the trunk of the patrol car, munching on a barbecued beef sandwich, a late lunch.

He clearly revels in a job he has held since 1979, when at the age of 27 he became one of the youngest mayors in the nation. Officer has been re-elected twice to a post that pays \$30,000 a year. His critics say it gives this man, who has an almost defiantly playboy image, a wonderful play toy — a city of some 50,000 residents, fire hats to wear, police cars to drive.

Critics are easy to find, but so are supporters. Few are lukewarm when asked their opinions about a mayor who at various times has unstrapped a shoulder-holstered 9mm pistol before delivering a civics lecture to schoolchildren; grabbed a fire hose and helped battle a blaze; wisecracked about "microwaving" money in the city's most recent financial emergency; and doggedly pursued a riverfront redevelopment plan despite a flurry of crippling suits.

Officer's problems might seem overwhelming: a virtually empty treasury, mounting debts, understaffed police and fire departments, an impoverished constituency. But he rarely loses his sense of humor

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Officer

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or is at a loss for words.

On a recent morning, an NBC reporter interviewed him shortly after 9 a.m. in his official office on the third floor of City Hall. The mayor, wearing a pin-striped blue suit and sky-blue shirt, looked surprisingly fresh for someone who claimed to have retired for the night a scant three hours earlier.

His professional duties, he explained, required that he "personally attend to the needs" of a sorority that was meeting in St. Louis.

For the next half hour, Officer was grilled about the avalanche of city difficulties. Asked where he would find the money to deal with them, he quipped, "I always come up with the money."

Glib, bluntly candid about the rough-house politics in St. Clair County, at times teasing, Officer was living up to his nickname emblazoned on a plaque on his desk: "Smooth."

He described how city services were crippled as revenue sharing was phased out, predicted better times when the Board of Aldermen is reduced from 16 to eight members next spring and said the problems with trash collection would be corrected.

Although known to favor an occasional sip of Jack Daniels — from bottles sometimes wrapped in a brown paper bag — Officer asked an aide to fetch a glass of water. "I don't want to see 'Jack' today at all," he said, his only reference to his long evening.

Shadowing the mayor on his excursions can be exhausting, said Pit Bull, one of five police officers assigned as Officer's bodyguards. About 5 feet 7 inches and muscular, a diamond glittering in his left ear lobe, Pit Bull declined to give his name or to have his photograph taken.

"He's running all the time," he said of his boss. "He never lets up. . . . We stay with him in shifts. I'll leave him in the evening, and then another guy will pick him up."

The guard detail has been a source of frequent complaint in a city short of police officers and in which Illinois state troopers help patrol the streets.

Late last year, the complaints became shrill when two bodyguards pulled a pistol and an Uzi submachine gun on a man who was said to have threatened the mayor in the restroom of a bar in Peoria. Both men later were suspended from their jobs as auxiliary police officers.

It turned out that one of the guards had a guarded past; he had been accused of rape, and his license as a security guard in St. Louis County had been revoked. He also had been fired as a Page-dale police officer after he was charged with theft and conspiracy to possess drugs — charges that were dropped just before trial when a key witness refused to testify.

Although the mayor declines to talk about threats against his life, he takes them seriously, said his press spokesman, James Ingram. Officer said that shots once were fired through the window of his parents' funeral home at 2114 Missouri Avenue. A few years later police learned that two men had spoken of a \$20,000 contract to kill the mayor.

Shortly after his NBC interview ended, Officer sat dozing in the back seat of a white city car while Pit Bull buried the speedometer at 80 mph through rolling farm country. The mayor was on his way to Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, where he was scheduled to introduce the Lincoln Senior High Jazz Band. The group was performing there at an arts conference.

Awakening from his catnap, the mayor offered a running, often racy commentary on the women in his life. He has lost none of the flair that repeatedly puts him on unofficial lists of the metropolitan area's most eligible bachelors. "I'm still looking for the right lady," said Officer, 36. "I'd love to have some kids."

Officer clearly had a roving eye during his few hours at the university. In short order, he encountered a young female student who asked to pose with him for a picture, got a name and address from another and offered a third a pack of chewing gum, saying, "I just want to see how your hands move."

When he concluded his brief remarks at the arts conference, Officer apologized to the several hundred people in the audience for having to leave early. He mentioned the sorority again. "I've got to go back and deal with all those 1,400 young ladies and all those problems facing my city."

It was quintessential Officer, a mixture of the serious and irreverent, the polished speaker and stand-up comedian.

After stopping at a Greek restaurant for a light beer and a gyro sandwich, he climbed back into the car for the bullet-ride back to East St. Louis. He chose his real work place this time — the cluttered room down the hall from his official office.

Officer waded into a stack of paper work, pausing to speak to one of his lawyers about the city's precarious finances and to answer a stream of telephone calls. After an hour or so, he sent an aide out for a couple of Miller High Lifes but was told the refrigerator had been emptied by the "beer fairies."

Several visitors mentioned a cover story on Officer that had recently appeared in St. Louis Magazine. The mayor, interviewed the day his city's assets were frozen, was quoted as saying that at such moments all he wanted was "heavy sex." He put extra spin on the comment by adding that he could "understand why Hitler took Eva Braun down into the bunker."

Did he regret saying it? someone asked.

Officer smiled and shook his head. "My constituents don't give a damn about that."

WEDNESDAY: Looking to the future.

The long-held nickname "Smooth" pretty well describes Carl E. Officer's personal style, but his nine years as mayor of East St. Louis could better be described as "rough."



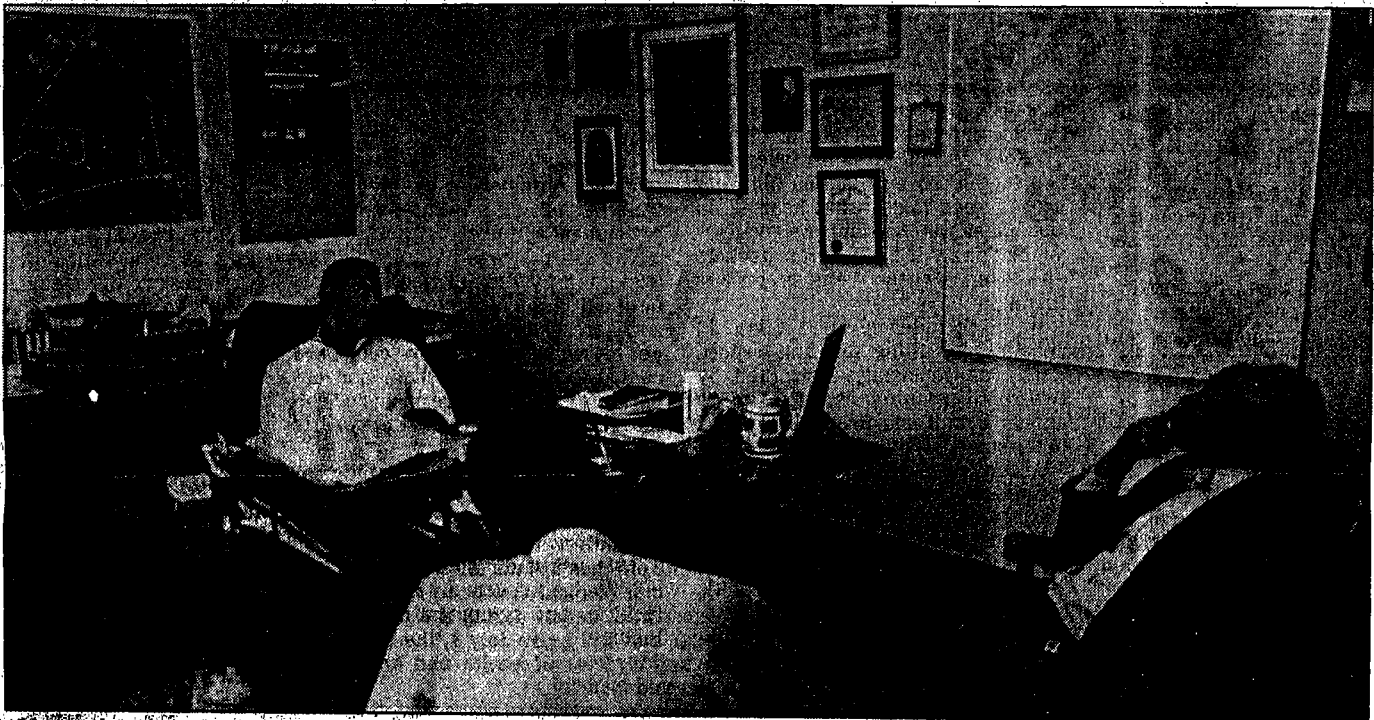
Few are lukewarm when asked their opinions about Carl Officer.



The mayor surveys vacant land on the south side of his city, where developers hope to build up to 50 new houses.



Before a speaking engagement at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Mayor Carl E. Officer does an impromptu Stevie Wonder impersonation.



Carl E. Officer relaxes in the mayor's office at East St. Louis City Hall with press secretary James Ingram, foreground, and lawyer Kenwyn Redding.