

'Wild West Warren' stands firm; Cobb sheriff doesn't back down on enforcing immigration laws.

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Body

When pro-immigrant groups labeled the Cobb County sheriff "Wild West Warren," it was intended as an insult.

The nickname for Neil Warren has stuck, though. Probably because he gets a kick out of it.

"If that's the worst thing they call me, I can take it," Sheriff Warren said with a laugh as he roamed the hallways of his office on a May afternoon.

Some staff members and friends have even taken to calling Warren "WWW" for short. It's a fitting description for a two-term sheriff who prefers to go his own way.

Warren has never bowed to pressure from pro-immigrant groups to abandon a controversial program that he pioneered in Georgia in 2007. The program, known as 287(g), trains deputies to identify illegal immigrants in jail and hand them over to federal immigration officials for deportation.

Warren's unbending stance on immigration law became a subject of renewed controversy in May when Kennesaw State University student Jessica Colotl, 21, was flagged for deportation following a March 29 arrest for driving without a license.

Warren had Colotl, a native of Mexico, arrested again just days after she secured a one-year deferment from Immigration and Customs Enforcement to finish her studies, this time for lying about her address on jail booking records.

The arrests made Colotl, an honors student who came into the country with her parents as a 10-year-old, something of a martyr for pro-immigrant groups who want national immigration reform.

Rich Pellegrino, director of the Cobb Immigrant Alliance, said, "I think he thinks he's doing the right thing," but targeting kids who are not a threat to the community is "frankly the lowest form of political pandering."

Warren doesn't see Colotl as a victim.

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"She violated the law when she came into the country illegally, and she violated state law by giving a false address," Warren said. "It's sad that her family put her in that situation, but once you become an adult, she knows right from wrong."

Critics say Warren is using Colotl as a pawn in a political game. He says the opposite is true.

"That's what they're doing," Warren said. "Have I had a press conference? No."

A lawman and a politician

Friends and co-workers say that behind Warren's image as straight-talking sheriff is a congenial boss, a collaborative community leader and a devoted family man. At 6 feet 2 inches and 200-plus pounds, he also casts an imposing shadow.

"He's just a big ol' burly bear," said Douglas County Sheriff Phil Miller. "Likable, a lot of fun to be around and very serious when it's time to do business."

Miller first met Warren on a multiagency task force in 1978. He and Warren remained close friends as they rose through the ranks of their respective agencies at about the same pace. Warren started as a deputy in 1974. He was elevated to sheriff in 2003 when his predecessor, Bill Hutson, retired.

Warren beat Democratic challenger Gregory Gilstrap by a 2-1 margin in 2004, and then won a 2008 rematch by a 60-40 split. Warren will run for re-election in 2012.

State Rep. Rob Teilhet (D-Smyrna), who is running as a Democratic candidate for attorney general, said he does not oppose Warren's decision to partner with ICE, but he believes national reform is the only real solution to the immigration problem. He said Warren's background as a career lawman sometimes makes him an awkward politician.

"His handling of issues in public can sometimes be a little clumsy or ham-fisted," said Teilhet.

But former Cobb County Commission Chairman Sam Olens said Warren works well with local politicians. He has overseen a \$110 million jail expansion that finished on time and under budget and helped to develop plans for a new \$63 million Superior Court building scheduled to open next spring, Olens said.

"It is common for sheriffs and commissioners to fight," Olens said. "He has been exceedingly professional and helpful."

Boots, golf and Elvis

Warren is a down-home guy right down to his black cowboy boots. When he's not on the job, you might find him dove or quail hunting, watching a University of Georgia football game (though his degree is from Brenau University) or playing golf.

His office decor suggests a variety of interests, from framed black-and-white photographs of Elvis Presley to a set of 25-pound dumbbells (for when he needs a little exercise). An expansive bookshelf holds fewer than five volumes --- one penned by conservative radio and TV host Glenn Beck. Another was written by Maricopa County (Arizona) Sheriff Joe Arpaio, a controversial lawman whose stance on illegal immigrants is regarded as among the toughest in the nation.

Warren dismissed Arpaio as a "showman," but said he has visited Arpaio's jail and even modeled parts of a new inmate processing area at the Cobb County jail after it.

Warren has cultivated a loyal and experienced senior command staff, the least tenured of whom is a 19-year veteran of the department. The other four commanders have all spent upward of 20 years working there. At a

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meeting of the top brass on Thursday, Warren listened as much as he talked and interrupted occasionally to ask questions.

"Are you getting feedback from the majors in all this?" Warren queried Col. Milton Beck during a discussion about the setup of the new jail tower, adding that it was important for everyone to feel ownership in the building.

Warren, one of six siblings, was born in Cherokee County and moved with his family to Cobb County in 1954. He and his wife, Penny, a social worker at Harrison High School, met 26 years ago while he was a sergeant and she was a probation officer. They have raised two daughters in Cobb.

However, the county Warren and his children grew up in is changing. Once a Republican bastion, the state delegation is now almost evenly split. The voting base is about 55 percent Republican and 45 percent Democrat, Teilhet observed. It remains to be seen whether Warren's stance on immigration will help or hurt Republicans like him in the long run.

"Change is coming," Pellegrino said. "It sends a message, and sometimes that message makes Neil Warren and others say maybe I have to get more moderate."

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Phil Miller

Douglas County Sheriff

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