

Gary Owen protects lakes, people

BY BETH WISCHMEYER
DCN STAFF

Gary Owen has a tough job. As a state conservation officer for the Department of Natural Resources, he wears many hats, from enforcement to education. As the father of eight and grandfather of six, his family life is also a big job.

Now from Spirit Lake, Gary was born in Ames where he graduated from Ames High School and attended Iowa State University. There he earned his bachelor's in Fisheries and Wildlife Biology.

Although Gary's father was a research scientist at Iowa State, Gary says he felt interested in other subjects.

"Growing up, I was really interested in getting into farming," Gary said. "I had family that farmed, and I started spending summers with them on the farm and working through high school and college as a farm hand."

Gary says that due to the economy at the time, getting into farming wasn't a feasible choice for him to make and he chose to study biology instead.

Gary met his wife Rebecca while she was in high school and he was in college. The couple married in 1973. Gary was also in the Navy for four years from 1971 until 1975 and had three tours in Southeast Asia. During this time serving in the Navy, he decided to pursue a career as a park ranger.

"Somewhere in the midst of schooling and working for the Iowa Conservation Commission (now the Department of Natural Resources) I made a change from parks to fish and wildlife with a navigation enforcement," Gary said.



PHOTO BY ANITRA WOLF · DCN STAFF

Department of Natural Resources Conservation Officer Gary Owen stands at the lookout tower near the DNR's lake patrol station at Gull Point State Park.

After college, Gary was hired as a full time conservation officer for Dickinson County and moved to Spirit Lake in November 1981 when he and his wife started a family. Gary and Rebecca have eight children - four biological and four adopted. They shared a passion for foster kids and decided to adopt four of the children they cared for.

During his time in Spirit Lake, Gary has also worked for three years as a recreational safety officer before returning to the position he is currently holding as a DNR state conservation officer.

Gary says his occupation is unique compared to other enforcement positions.

"We are unique in law enforcement in that we work with law enforcement and educational programs as well," Gary said. "We're in charge of hunter education, boater education and snow-

mobile/ATV education. It's a unique enforcement position because it allows us to work with the kids and turn it around on that aspect."

Gary says he strongly believes that a good enforcement program begins with education, making the education part of his job something he really enjoys.

"It allows us to get involved with the young kids at an early age to train them and educate them to remain safe," Gary said.

Gary says his job duties change with the season.

"I'll go right from Labor Day weekend, and the next weekend will be a water fowl opener," Gary said. "We have the hunting regulations until the water freezes up and then it's ice fishing, snowmobiling and ATVs, and when the ice is gone we go right back to the open water. But by far, summer is the busiest period."

During the summer, one of Gary's main jobs is supervising the Lake Patrol and Water Patrol Officers, who oversee the Iowa Great Lakes and help keep them safe.

In the summer of 2007, Gary oversaw 11 Water Patrol Officers, which was upgraded from five officers two years ago to accommodate the lake's growing needs.

"It allows us to give the type of coverage we need to on the lake," Gary said. "We can now give 24-hour coverage. Two years ago we didn't."

Gary says that the Lake Patrol has been beneficial in keeping water enthusiasts safe and informed.

"I've seen a drastic change in the flavor of the lake, changing from wild and aggressive to more of a family atmosphere," Gary said. "Some would say that's progress; others would say it's not."

Although Gary has done his job for quite some time, he says that ongoing training and education come with his line of work.

"We are certified peace officers; we have to attend and graduate the Iowa State Law Enforcement Academy,

PROFILE

NAME: Gary Owen

AGE: 55

FAMILY: Wife Rebecca of 34 years; eight children: Amanda Jorgensen, 27, married to Greg Jorgensen; Alisha Orton, 25, married to Rob Orton; Tessa Owen, 24; Alexis Owen, 21; Allison Owen, 19; Tabitha Owen, 17; Jacob Owen, 13, and Kathryn Owen, 10; six grandchildren and one more on the way.

PROFESSION: State Conservation Officer

SOMETHING ABOUT GARY THAT MOST PEOPLE DO NOT KNOW IS

that he is really a quiet "to himself" type of person.

which trains us in law enforcement," Gary said. "We also have our annual type of training that we have to keep ourselves abreast of firearms, defensive tactics, CPR, first aid and defensive driving among others. These are things that we annually have to train and re-train to keep ourselves profi-

cient in."

Gary says that due to the vast amount of training in many different areas, the DNR officers tend to be one of the most highly trained departments in the state of Iowa.

"We are on the highways, roads and on the lakes," Gary said. "We have lots of things we have to maintain proficiency in and ability to deal with - storms on the lake to people falling through the ice to hunting accidents. I guess what makes the job so exciting is the diversity."

Gary says the favorite parts of his job are being outdoors, working with people and keeping the lakes safe. To someone who is looking to become a state conservation officer, Gary says it starts with education.

"I would say get a four-year degree in environmental science, and get as much experience as a person can," Gary said.

As far as the future is concerned, Gary says although he could retire, he chooses not to.

"I will continue to do this as long as I am physically capable to perform my job responsibilities," Gary said.