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## "You never have to guess what Rick is thinking"

By Emily Heffter and Jennifer Sullivan

*Times Snohomish County Bureau*

Gary Simeral was watching football in his Marysville living room in 1995 when a nervous Republican candidate for county sheriff knocked on his door.

It was the first house Rick Bart visited during his campaign. The longtime sheriff's deputy made such an impression with Simeral, and later with many other voters, that he easily beat his incumbent opponent, who was embroiled in a prescription-drug scandal. "[Bart] seemed so damn honest about everything," Simeral remembered. "I just found him very refreshing in that way."

Bart became the first Republican sheriff in Snohomish County since the Truman administration. And he remains, despite the County Council's GOP majority, one of the few Republican leaders in a historically Democratic county.

Entering his 10th year as sheriff, Bart has grown into one of the county's most controversial figures. And he's grown into a politician, however begrudgingly. He said he'll run against County Executive Aaron Reardon in 2007.

Outspoken and gregarious, Bart bad-mouths his political opponents publicly and torments his peers with practical jokes.

You're as likely to see him in his sheriff's uniform as in his other "uniform": a Hawaiian shirt and khakis, with a .45-caliber handgun tucked into his waistband. When he sees his friends, he's as likely to wave hello as to grin and flip them "the bird."

"I've had political advisers tell me I shouldn't be so open and honest with my comments," he said.

Bart conceded that he's gone too far at times and made some "stupid comments," such as the time he told a reporter that Reardon was an "arrogant son of a bitch."

Still, he said, "I feel better knowing that people know where I'm coming from."

Though Bart's honesty and loyalty to his department have earned him a devoted following, some county officials find him politically reckless.

### **Tough on personal life**

Bart's foray into politics has placed his personal and professional lives under scrutiny, something he said he's still getting used to.

In the past decade, he has endured the suicide of a close friend and fellow deputy. He went through his second divorce during his second campaign for sheriff. In 1999, he ordered deputies to arrest his brother, Ron, for cocaine trafficking.

"My job, being the sheriff, it can take a toll on your personal life," he said.

The job is time-consuming. Bart said he has learned to turn down speaking engagements and to talk to his wife before he agrees to go to night meetings.



[enlarge](#) JIM BATES / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Snohomish County Sheriff  
Rick Bart takes part in a recent  
planning meeting for a youth  
summit to combat  
methamphetamine use.

On the job, his deputies have been hit with sex-crime allegations, and in 2000 the department reached a \$412,000 court settlement with a Bulgarian recluse who was bitten by a sheriff's dog when he was arrested.

As the county's population has grown under Bart's watch, rural neighborhoods have emerged as havens for methamphetamine use and production. A 2003 article in Rolling Stone magazine focused on the county's meth problem and dubbed Granite Falls "methtown."

Bart counts his work fighting meth among his most important accomplishments. He hasn't been able to afford the large methamphetamine "strike team" he wants, but he has found other ways to fight the drug.

Susan York, the executive director of Lead on America, a local anti-drug group, talks with Bart almost weekly about the push to eradicate meth use in the county.

"The reason why I was so drawn to him is we share the same concerns about the level of danger, the level of intensity and the fast spread of methamphetamine use," York said. "He makes a huge difference. I can pick up the phone, call him and ask him to speak to a group tomorrow night, and he'll be there."

Beth Kerwin credits Bart for helping her family. Kerwin's daughter went into treatment for meth when she was 17 and pregnant. Now, Kerwin and her daughter help coordinate an annual youth meth summit, a seminar with teenagers, parents and county officials.

"He's our No. 1 support for this whole meth program that we've got," Kerwin said of Bart. "If it wasn't for him, I don't think we'd have the same momentum for fighting the drug in this county."

Pat Slack, the commander of the Snohomish Regional Drug Task Force, said Bart has been supportive of the task force since its creation in 1988. Bart, a former task-force member, is the chairman of the narcotics agency's executive board.

But some of Bart's efforts to fight drugs have been stunted by the county budget. The economic recession has been accompanied by county officials trying to hold the line on spending on criminal justice.

This year, for the first time, spending on law and justice topped 70 percent of the general fund, in part because officials will open a new county jail in March.

When Reardon insisted his 2005 budget wouldn't require the sheriff to cut deputies, Bart disagreed, loudly.

He fired off angry memos, lobbied the County Council and supplied reporters with copies of spreadsheets, and ultimately, the council restored some money.

"I think the sheriff does an excellent job; however, he doesn't look, in the budget process, outside his world," said Councilman Kirke Sievers, D-Everett, the chairman of the council's budget committee.

Councilman John Koster, R- Arlington, said Bart's frustration over the budget is understandable. Bart is the one county official to whom residents often complain, he said.

Bart's frustration over the 2005 budget was fueled by his personality conflict with Reardon, who took over as county executive at the beginning of 2004. Bart criticized Reardon's new priority-based budget process and said the executive was overly political and bossy.

"A lot of people in government don't like change, and a lot of people in government don't like to justify their expenditures," Reardon said.

As for Bart's comments about him, Reardon said: "That's not how I conduct myself, but to each his own."

Snohomish County Chief Criminal Deputy Prosecutor Mark Roe said: "People have a love-hate relationship with Rick. A lot of people can't stand him. I've always liked him because he'll say what he's thinking. You can call him political, but you can't call him politically correct."

### **Political support**

But for every government official Bart rubs the wrong way, there are many voters checking the ballot box next to his name. In the last election, Bart ran unopposed.

Few county voters initially knew him when he ran in 1995 against the appointed incumbent, Patrick Murphy.

"At that particular time, he was kind of a longshot, but he overcame that," Sievers said.

But Bart's win by 75 percent was something of a fluke. A week before the general election, Murphy was charged with four counts of illegally obtaining prescription drugs. The charges were later dropped, but they helped Bart win by a landslide.

Bart now says he isn't sure he would have won the election without Murphy's legal trouble.

Simeral said that in that first conversation with Bart in his living room, he saw barely a trace of the political powerhouse the sheriff has become.

"I think he was afraid to knock on doors," Simeral recalled. "He was at the time a relatively shy guy. He's really changed a lot over the years. He was almost shaking."

Bart, too, remembers that day. He set out in his neighborhood to "see if I really want to do this."

"I was nervous," he said. "I didn't know what he was going to ask me."

Bart attributes his success as a politician to advice his parents gave him: "to be myself and try to use common sense and don't try to change yourself to fit the circumstances."

That has served him well with voters, he said, because they just want someone they can trust. "I think if you do a good job and try to be as fair as you can, I think that voters recognize that."

Bart is known for speaking his mind. He is often described as funny — "crazy," his friends call him.

"He isn't a hard guy to figure out," Councilman Koster said. "He's certainly an outspoken individual. You never have to guess what Rick is thinking."

### **Early years**

Bart, 56, was born in Sedro-Woolley. He grew up near Lynnwood in unincorporated Snohomish County and graduated from Mountlake Terrace High School. He joined the Air Force after high school.

In the military, Bart was assigned to police duties and guarded U2 spy planes at an Alaska air base. After three years, he left the Air Force and returned to Snohomish County with his son and first wife.

In 1972, Bart was hired as a guard at the Snohomish County Jail before climbing the ranks at the Sheriff's Office. He worked in patrol and homicide, and for the Snohomish Regional Narcotics Task Force before running against and defeating his former precinct supervisor, Stan Boyes, in the Republican 1995 primary for sheriff.

Bart is an avid hunter and golfer. For several years, he's made an annual trip to Colorado to hunt deer and elk with a cousin.

"I like being close to nature, just being out there," he said.

He's known to rise early and wade around Skagit County, hunting ducks as a stress reliever. "It's a major part of my life," he said.

A running joke with Bart's Rotary Club friends is about cooking: He loves to cook and makes dinner nearly every night, he said. He's famous among his friends for the giant crock of mustard pickles he makes every year from his mother's recipe.

That's the kind of information Bart never thought he'd see in the newspaper, but he said he's ready to accept the label of public official, even if it sends him out to doorbell again, seeking support for his next office.

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