

Regional

Former ESTL mayor gives back to alma mater

As an educator and university administrator, one of the nicest parts of my job is when I get to meet alumni who have not only been successful in their careers, but who decide to give back to their alma mater. This is the case of Gordon Bush, a two-term mayor of East St. Louis. Born in East St. Louis, Bush received his bachelor's degree in art and a master's in geography from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. One of the ways Bush has given back to SIUE is to establish a scholarship for students in the department of political science. Bush's own route into politics was very personal.

"I was a high school senior and my father was working at the Alcoa aluminum-ore plant in East St. Louis," Bush said. "They were getting ready to shut the plant down, which meant that my father would no longer have a job. And I read in the paper that the people in city hall, including the mayor, said, 'Well, they're leaving, so be it.'" He found that attitude appalling, so he went to city hall to meet with the city planner to ask why they had not done more to keep the jobs in the city. They told him that they were leaving, and that there were other jobs.

"They weren't worried about it, kind of cavalier and nonchalant," he said. "But there was one gentleman, Roy Gruber, who was administrative assistant to the mayor. He told me, 'If you're concerned about this issue, and there may be others like this, you ought to think about going into city administration, or government, and try to be able to affect change and stop these sorts of things from happening.'" And so he did. After receiving his degree he got a job in the city-planning department and worked as a community organizer.

"That position let me talk to some others in government, and we had some ideas we wanted to initiate and bring to the city council," he said. "We met with them, proposed the ideas, and they just put them on the shelf. I thought, wow, you really have to be on the council or be mayor to affect change. That put a little seed in my mind."

While being the mayor of a city sounds like a good job, the problems that have



Photo by Erica Brooks

Mr. Gordon Bush during one of his public engagements.

historically plagued East St. Louis make it one of the most difficult to lead of any American city. Crime, financial woes, environmental issues and political upheaval are just some of the city's challenges. Bush said he knew that there were many issues to tackle, but he realized that he had to first deal with the severe environmental problems left behind by the heavy industry that had abandoned the city. Major environmental problems are very expensive to remediate, he explained. As an example,

he pointed to the former American Steel Foundry.

"There are still remnants of what they left there," he said "And the same with the packing houses. They just left it. There's a lot of cleaning up still to do. When I ran for mayor, we had a million tires strewn about the city. The state came in to help, and SIUE and the University of Illinois did some things. We had 40,000 truckloads of trash all over the city, because there was no trash pickup for two years.

The city didn't have the equipment, so it was in alleys, weeded lots and abandoned industrial buildings."

Bush was on active military duty and he had orders to go the Pentagon, where he was to have been promoted to general officer, when he decided that his career path had to bring him back to his hometown.

"We were taught as youngsters to reach back if we were ever successful, reach back and help those who needed it," he said.

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

"So I went back to my commanding officer and said, 'I'm getting out of the army and running for mayor of East St. Louis.' He said, 'Do you know what you're turning down? East St. Louis has the highest homicide rate per capita in America, no trash pick-up, funds have been cut off. You want to be mayor of that?' And I said, 'I think I can make a difference. With the training that I've had at SIUE and in the military, I'm ready.' He told me, 'Gordon, we believe you can do the job, but there's a political machine over there. You are just going to jump into that?'"

His wife Brenda also had reservations. "She said, 'You turned down this military career, so now you better win.' And win we did." Upon taking the mayor's office, he said, he was not surprised by what he found, and even received help from unexpected places.

"The mayor of St. Louis sent help with their sanitation department, the governor helped me, the university was very helpful to me," he said. "What we made clear was that we were about business now." His performance as a mayor gave him national notoriety, to the point that he was offered a high-ranking job at the Environmental Protection Agency in the Clinton administration.

"I didn't take it because I felt that my work wasn't complete, that I was only halfway to fulfilling the commitment I had made to the citizens, my wife and the Heavenly Father," he said. "I felt there was still more I could do." When asked if he has hope that East St. Louis will become a much better place, he was unequivocal. "I think it's coming," he said. "It's inevitable."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Sciences@siue.edu.