

HEADLINE: Former Gumshoe Makes Information Technology Look Easy

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Gary McFarland is the Director of Information Technology for the city of West University Place and has been a TAGITM member since 1996. At that time, the annual conferences were small – maybe 50 attendees max. He has been active ever since and served as Membership Chair twice - in 2005 and 2006, Treasurer in 2007, Vice-President in 2008 and President in 2009. As a Past President, he has chaired and participated on several Nominating Committees and Charter revision Committees. He is a Certified Government Chief Information Officer (CGCIO), having graduated in 2012.

McFarland is a former police officer, firefighter and junior college instructor with 36 years of total municipal service. He developed an interest in computers when, as a police officer in Missouri City, he was tasked with finding a new radio system for that city's public safety personnel. The 800 MHz radio system included a brand new, "state of the art" IBM Personal Computer XT that served as the site controller.

At that time -- the mid-1980s -- Missouri City had about 17,000 residents, a "double-wide trailer" that served as its police department, and three patrol officers per shift. Some police officers were dually trained as firefighters, and carried equipment and air packs in their patrol cars.

What began as a quest for better communications for first responders, eventually led to multiple roles at Missouri City for McFarland. He worked as a police officer/firefighter, managed the radio system, and then went on-loan for six months to a software company for the creation of public safety software.

He recalls the "mini-computer" that the city had then. "It was about the size of a washing machine, only taller," McFarland says.

McFarland's work with the company meant spending time between Missouri City and Independence, Missouri -- where he helped develop a system for computerized records management, court records and other applications.

"That's where I decided I did not want to be a programmer."

Eventually, McFarland moved off the streets from his patrol car to the Missouri City, newly created, Information Technology department. But, he was still managing the radio system and teaching at Wharton County Junior College Police Academy.

"It was too much," he says.

In 1994, he left Missouri City and went to work for the city of Sugar Land as its Information Technology Director.

"They had just completed their initial computerization. They had 48 PCs (personal computers), two servers and communications to four remote sites," McFarland says.

Meanwhile, growth in Fort Bend County and the city of Sugar Land “exploded.” “We went from being a sleepy little town to what you see there now,” McFarland says. When he retired from the city of Sugar Land, the city had more than 500 PCs, about 50 servers housed in three data centers, and a technology staff of 15.

Looking for another challenge, McFarland joined the city of West U in 2007. What he discovered was that the West U information technology “system” was “stuffed into 7 closets” spread throughout the Municipal Building and old police station.

These days, McFarland is proud of the state-of-the-art technology center on the new Municipal Building’s second floor. The city’s systems are centralized, virtualized, redundant and automatically monitored.

“I like building things,” McFarland says. And, a computer network is constantly evolving.

McFarland has been married to his wife, Cathy, since 1980. They have four children -- three boys, Stephen, Bobby, Brad, and a daughter, Katie. The boys are all college graduates, and Katie is studying sociology at Texas A&M University.

Each of the boys was given an old car to restore on his 16th birthday. New cars purchased at a dealership are considered “store-bought” in the McFarland household.

McFarland, the proud father of three Eagle Scouts, holds one of Boy Scouting’s highest honors. His Silver Beaver award, given to just a handful of Scout leaders each year, is proudly displayed in his West U office.

He is proud that Katie was chosen to be on staff at Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico. Vacationing at Philmont has been a family tradition for the last 10 years.

McFarland continues to work in Scouting, although he considers himself “a retired Scoutmaster.” He is very involved in the Wood Badge program, a high-level adult training system that takes about 18 months to complete. He served as a Course Director for the Sam Houston Area Council in the spring of 2012.

McFarland says he still enjoys Scouting because “It’s a fellowship.”

“It’s people who don’t necessarily live in my area and they are highly motivated. We all share the same values and goals for youth. We are a community.”

In his West U office, McFarland is surrounded by mementos from his 36-year career as a municipal employee. There is included “a small museum” of police communications devices from a brick-sized phone to a hefty hand-held radio. There are plaques for being the city employee of the year (twice) in Missouri City and once in Sugar Land, the police officer of the year in Missouri City, and a “heart and sole” award from a graduating class of police cadets at Wharton County junior college.

That award is for the time when McFarland was helping host an event for potential police recruits at the junior college. In those days, police officers always wore boots or highly

polished dress shoes. McFarland had purchased a “cheap pair” that began melting as he strode across the asphalt parking lot that hot August day in Wharton County. Eighteen months later, the new recruits took the soles of those shoes and had them mounted on a plaque as “a graduation present” to their popular teacher.

McFarland has plenty of stories from his days as a “public safety officer” in Missouri City, where he was cross-trained as a policeman and a fire fighter. He stays away from “the blood and gore” stories, but willingly shares a story about a young man who was walking in the middle of the street one night, noticeably under-the-influence.

McFarland pulled his patrol car over, and asked for the man’s ID.

Demonstrating, McFarland whips his wallet out, flips it open and speaks: “Quick Scottie, beam me aboard,” the man said. He was arrested, but not before McFarland cracked up laughing.

“Oh yeah, he was just a little bit intoxicated, McFarland says.