



Former Guilford County Sheriff Walter “Sticky” Burch is turning 100 and he’s ready to party. 19th President SPIAA 1969-70

When Burch was born just outside of Asheville on Oct. 21, 1918, there were no public radio broadcasts, World War I was still raging and commercial air travel was brand new. Cut to a full century later and Burch is still going strong. At 100, the well-known former sheriff of Guilford County still works out regularly and has his driver’s license.

“It’s good until 2020,” Burch said of that license.

On Monday, Oct. 15, Guilford County Sheriff BJ Barnes is throwing a big party for Burch from 6 to 8:30 p.m. at the Shrine Club at 5010 High Point Road. Anyone and everyone is invited and there’s no charge, but there will be plenty of cake and ice cream.

“I understand they have got a lot of folks coming,” Burch said.

Several community organizations are also honoring Burch this month for his birthday.

Recently, 13th District Congressman Ted Budd read a proclamation on the floor of Congress honoring Burch. At that time, Budd asked everyone to help celebrate Burch’s birthday and his “lifelong commitment to public service.”

Budd said, “Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize Walter ‘Sticky’ Burch, who is going to be 100 years old on Oct. 21. And that is a great day, Mr. Speaker. It is also my birthday, although mine is just a few years after his.”

Budd spoke on Burch’s contributions to law enforcement and his service in the armed forces during World War II – Burch began serving just nine days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Budd went on to talk about Burch’s decades as an officer with the Greensboro Police Department and his eight years as sheriff of Guilford County.

“Since retiring from law enforcement, Walter has remained deeply involved in our community, and the people of Guilford County are lucky to have him,” he said.

Burch, who spent nearly his entire life in Greensboro and now resides at Heritage Greens, a retirement community, said he’s honored by the attention he’s getting as he hits the century mark.

Burch said his knees and his back sometimes bother him but he’s ready for all the parties this month.

A father of three and a grandfather, Burch retired in the early ’80s after serving with the Greensboro Police Department for about 40 years.

In 1986, Burch, a Democrat, won his bid to be sheriff by defeating Barnes, the Republican contender in that race. Burch beat Barnes again for the seat four years later, but, in 1994, the third time proved a charm for Barnes, who edged out Burch that year and has been sheriff ever since.

Burch said it was an honor to serve as sheriff and he said he’s proud of what the department accomplished during those eight years.

The Guilford County Sheriff’s Department had some well-publicized problems in the early ’80s and some in the community thought Burch was the right man to whip the department into shape.

“They asked me to run for sheriff and I did reluctantly,” Burch said. “I enjoyed my terms – I really enjoyed my eight years as sheriff. There seemed to be plenty to do when I took office. I guess I wasn’t so smart myself, but I was fortunate enough to have good people to work with.”

Burch said one problem at the time was “food going out the backdoor of the jail,” and they fixed that issue quickly. The department at that time also started using video cameras for First Appearances court, which meant inmates didn’t need to be transported as frequently between High Point and Greensboro. Burch and his staff also implemented programs that helped reduce the jail population since there was a major overcrowding problem at the time.

Burch grew up during the Great Depression but said that didn’t make much difference to him.

“We grew up pretty poor, but I never did notice,” he said. “I always had a good meal to eat, a warm bed to sleep in and a loving family.”

He attended Greensboro High School, now Grimsley, and then attended Presbyterian College for one year.

In World War II, Burch served in Air Force intelligence.

“Then it was the US Army Air Force,” he said.

He and his unit scouted out the enemy in Europe. The unit would, among other duties, take pictures of targets for bombing runs on the following day.

Burch has served in a wide variety of community organizations during his life and he remains active with the Greensboro Jaycees Old Timers Club and the Greensboro Shrine Club.

Though he and Barnes were political opponents in the ’80s and ’90s, they’ve been close over the years and the two men still speak frequently. Burch is a strong backer of Barnes in the current sheriff’s race and he speaks very highly of the sheriff.

“BJ has really improved on what I did with the department,” Burch said.

Burch also said that he has inquired of many people over the years as to how Barnes is handling the department.

“In all of that time, I’ve never asked anyone what kind of job he’s doing who hasn’t told me he’d doing a good job,” Burch said. “And that’s impressive because that’s been over 24 years. His heart is really in it.”

When Burch is asked if he ever gives Barnes advice about running the Sheriff’s Department, Burch just laughed and said, “You *can’t* give him any advice – he knows it all.”

Barnes said he has the highest regard for Burch and has for years. He said that, one time after Burch beat him out for sheriff, his, Barnes’, daughter was so upset she was crying. Burch saw that and was very upset he’d been the cause of so much pain for a little girl. Burch told Barnes at that time that he felt so bad that he was about to just give the job to Barnes.

“He has always been a gentleman and scholar,” Barnes added.

Barnes said that even the political races between the two men were highly civil.

“I brought up some escapes [from the jail], but we were not nasty,” Barnes said.

Guilford County Commissioner Alan Perdue, a former director of Guilford County Emergency Services who worked his entire adult life in county fire and emergency services, began his stint with the county in 1979. Perdue often worked with Burch when he was sheriff.

“I was doing arson investigations when he was sheriff so I’ve worked with him and the Sheriff’s criminal investigation unit,” Perdue said. “He was very easy to approach and always open and honest about anything we took to him. He was certainly willing to listen and give you his input.”

Perdue said Burch was a real asset to the city and the county in other ways as well.

“He’s a community-minded individual whether he’s at the Sheriff’s office or the Shrine Club – with any other need that was out there he was always out there to lend his support.”

Oh, and where did Burch get the name “Sticky”?

Well, even Sticky himself isn’t entirely positive, but Burch said he believes it came from the time when he was a receiver for the Greensboro High School football team. When the ball was thrown to him it would stick to his hands – or so the legend goes.

Burch said that story doesn’t really make sense, however, because he honestly wasn’t that good at catching the ball.

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