

Fall and rise

Boyle says mayoral twilight has sunny side

By Jen Deselms
Senior Editor

Mike Boyle says he doesn't dwell on the past. The desk in his law office at Merrill Lynch Plaza is cluttered with the business at hand. Only a few items remain from his time as mayor.

A trophy from the Annual City-County Golf Championship sits on a shelf near the window, along with several volumes of Revised Statutes of Nebraska.

And on the wall in front of his desk, along with his diplomas from Creighton University, hangs a certificate inducting Mayor Mike Boyle into the mythical Great Nebraska Navy.

It's not much to mark one of the longest and most controversial mayoral reigns in Omaha history — just a few trinkets.

And yet it was just slightly more than a year ago that Boyle was ousted from office in the city's first successful recall . . . a nasty fight, packed with charges and countercharges.

Boyle's opponents listed a litany of offenses:

- A butter-throwing incident with then-Gov. Bob Kerrey.
- The arrest of two of the mayor's sons, along with two other youths, on suspicion of soliciting prostitutes.
- Accusations that Boyle warned his brother-in-law of an FBI gambling probe.
- A bevy of what were termed arbitrary City Hall firings.
- Thinly veiled rumors about a drinking problem.

Election through recall

- May 12, 1981** — Boyle defeats Veys for mayor.
- June 8, 1981** — Boyle takes office.
- Oct. 20, 1984** — Boyle suffers near-fatal heart attack.
- May 14, 1985** — Boyle defeats former police lieutenant Bill Krejci in re-election bid.
- Oct. 3, 1986** — Boyle fires Police Chief Wadman.
- Dec. 9, 1986** — Police Union votes to buy ad supporting Boyle in recall election.
- Jan. 13, 1987** — Boyle recalled by a vote of 55,334 to 42,974.
- Jan. 26, 1987** — Boyle leaves office.
- March 25, 1987** — Judge rules Wadman should be reinstated.

Tom Lauder/Daily Nebraskan

Not only were Boyle's actions inappropriate, opponents said, but the mayor's response to any criticism was growing increasingly arrogant, almost king-like.

Boyle says the charges were exaggerated. They stemmed mostly from a misunderstanding of his brand of humor, he says, and were unfairly reported by the local media, especially the Omaha World-Herald.

And, he says, critics overlooked the accomplishments of his administration — great improvement in fire and police protection and other safety measures, better street maintenance and a revitalized downtown.

Omahans listened to both sides, and on Jan. 13, 1987, by a vote of 55,334 to 42,974, turned Boyle out of office.

Still, Boyle says he's not bitter. "I really believe in democracy," he says, "but I'm not always happy with the way things turn out sometimes." A youthful smile tugs at his lips and then vanishes — hinting at why some had called him "the boy mayor."

But at 37, Boyle was no newcomer to politics when he defeated incumbent Al Veys by 1,592 votes in the 1981 mayoral race. He had served as president of Douglas County Young Democrats, chief deputy to the Douglas County Election Commissioner and election commissioner, the position from which he resigned to run for mayor.

Boyle says he's not sure when he first became interested in politics but remembers putting that interest to work, helping put up yard signs for local candidates.

And as a student at Omaha Cathedral High School, Boyle was intrigued by John F. Kennedy — not only because they shared the same religion but also because of their Irish heritage.

Much of the encouragement to run for mayor came from Boyle's wife of 23 years, Anne, and her father, Sam Howell, longtime Douglas County treasurer.

"My wife's probably the biggest one — the biggest influence," Boyle says. "She's not a Nancy Reagan type or anything . . . she's very bright and she's a good politician and hard-working and all the rest. She's just a really good

political operative. She knows what's going on. "It really is helpful to have, you know, a spouse that supports what you're doing regardless of what it is."

His wife's support remained just as important, if not more, during the recall.

Anne Boyle says she encouraged her husband to run for office against Veys in 1981 because of his creativity, his good mind and his "never say never" attitude.

And more than a year into his second term, when the recall petition gained the required signatures, she encouraged him again.

"It was something we discussed and mutually agreed upon," she says. "It was the right thing to do."

If her husband hadn't run, she says, the family and Omaha's citizens always would have wondered what the outcome would have been.

She continues to believe in her husband — in his ideas and in the good things he brought to Omaha's government.

Boyle says city management requires attention to details. But often his intensity annoyed city employees.

For example, when Boyle went on business trips he took a computer with him so he could communicate with officials in Omaha. At night, when he couldn't sleep, he would type memos that were ready and waiting when employees came into work.

If he was driving down an Omaha street and saw a chuckhole, he would call it in, expecting it to be repaired within 24 hours.

"It drove people crazy. There's no question about it — absolutely drove them nuts," he says. "It can be seen as a compulsion. It can be seen as a meddling. It can be seen as a lot of things if you're on the wrong end of it."

Others, however, saw Boyle as a dedicated, hard-working administrator.

Former Lincoln Mayor Helen Boosalis says she and Boyle cooperated when issues of mutual interest arose.

"Mike was so interested in everything about his city," she says. "I found him a very competent, friendly person who cared about his city."

But some saw Boyle in a different light.

During the latter part of his 5 1/2 years in office, area newspapers and television stations were filled with stories on investigations, accusations and apologies. The controversy culminated with Boyle's firing of Omaha Police Chief Robert Wadman. A Douglas County district judge ruled in March 1987 that Wadman had to be reinstated.

Boyle won't rehash the details of the conflicts he and his family had with the police.

And despite the much-publicized arguments, the Omaha Police Union supported Boyle in his fight against the recall.

At the time, United Press International reported union president Greg Thompson as saying Boyle's conflicts with police had been exaggerated.

But the running hassle with police did play a role in the recall election. Citizens for Mature Leadership listed Wadman's firing among seven reasons why Boyle should be recalled.

James Cleary, then spokesman of Citizens for Mature Leadership, doesn't want to dig up the past either.

"It's history at this point," the current city councilman says.

"I never did have any personal animosity toward him at all," he says. ". . . I wish him all the luck in the world. I really mean that."

Boyle says his term in office certainly wasn't perfect. But, he adds, neither was the news reporting.

Newspapers reported that Wadman's firing stemmed from an investigation into the arrest of John Howell, Boyle's brother-in-law, on suspicion of driving while intoxicated. Howell later pleaded guilty to the charge.

It was reported that top city officials said they suspected the arrest was intended to make Boyle take improper action.

Boyle says what started out as a story about two policemen saying they felt bad about improper surveillance involving Boyle's family became twisted by the Omaha press.

"It was, I think, journalism at its worst," he says. "When you're on someone's list like that, there's nothing you can do when they buy their ink by the tank car and paper by the carload."

During his two terms in office, newspapers and television also reported several threats on Boyle's life.

Two of Boyle's major public appearances about a week before the recall election were disrupted by bomb threats. But that was nothing new to Boyle, his wife or their five children.

The first death threat came in 1981 on the night he was inaugurated.



Andy Manhart/Daily Nebraskan

"The first time — not that it gets any better — but the first time is really harrowing because you're just not used to it," he says. "You're a normal citizen doing what you want to do and coming and going. The next thing you know, you have people with guns around you all the time."

As the threats increased, so did the police protection.

Plainclothes officers followed his sons to the basketball courts. Officers slept in the den or sat up all night.

"That was something that was really kind of crazy," he says, combing his fingers through his brown hair. Scattered silver strands flash briefly as the hair falls into place.

Boyle considered not running for re-election in 1985 because of the threats. At one point his family got a call from a woman who said she heard people saying Boyle would be shot.

"That's pretty eerie. So those sorts of things had me thinking, now wait a minute, you know, I'm not really dying to be mayor. . . ."

Boyle's sense of humor has allowed him to laugh about some of the tough times. But the same humor has gotten him into trouble.

As he thinks about the pranks he played as mayor, he presses his fingers against his cheek — as he often does — and chuckles.

At ground breakings, Boyle says, he would sometimes take a shovelful of dirt and throw it on the feet of a TV cameraman.

"And I used to do it to other dignitaries who I thought were a little huffy, you know," he says. "They really kind of thought they were pretty important stuff. It'd be fun and I knew them. They were nice people, but they were taking themselves too seriously. So I'd get a bunch of dirt and throw it on the shoe of the guy standing next to me."

'I imagine in the years to come you'll hear from him again.'

—Veys

Sometimes, when a joke got into print, it just didn't sound funny, he says.

"You can get in trouble for your sense of humor," Boyle says. "Sometimes it's misplaced and other times, the way it sounds, people just don't understand it."

Boyle says he realized his sense of humor was not funny to some Omahans and he made himself stop throwing one-liners during news conferences.

"I share some of the responsibility for what happened," he says. "I mean, it didn't drop out of the sky. They weren't totally right and I wasn't totally wrong."

Apparently it's not an easy task pleasing Omaha voters. No Omaha mayor has served two full terms under the city's 31-year-old charter. Boyle says several mayors who could have been re-elected simply didn't run.

Former Mayor Veys says Boyle, like many other elected officials, forgot where he came from and where he was going back to.

"The hat size should remain the same," Veys says. "His personal attitude was what got him in trouble."

"I imagine in the years to come you'll hear from him again," he says.

Veys categorizes Boyle as "a very vindictive guy." But, he adds, the employees' fear of losing their jobs made the Public Works Department snap to attention.

Boyle says some people just don't like him, although he's unsure why.

"I really do invoke a — and maybe it's because of the sense of humor that's misunderstood, I don't know — but I do invoke a certain degree of feeling. There's some people that really don't like me, you know, they really don't."

That's not to say Boyle has no strong supporters. Even this Christmas, nearly a year after the recall, hundreds of Omahans still sent letters of support to Boyle and his family — despite his unlisted address.

People still stop him, encouraging him to run for an office again.

Boyle says nice people, religion and support from his family have helped him heal.

Boyle says it was difficult after 20 years to leave politics. But, he says, the recall didn't make him seriously consider leaving Omaha. He and his wife did think briefly about moving to Lincoln, but decided there was no reason to leave.

"If I had, you know, stolen a half a million dollars or something," he says, ". . . I'd have something to be ashamed of. I don't have anything to be ashamed of. It was almost hysteria and a whole lot of things. In football they call it piling on."

"I did a good job. And even the detractors said that. But they didn't like my style — whatever that is."

"It's one of those things. When you start making decisions . . . someone's going to be unhappy."

"I mean, to do otherwise, why be in office?"

Boyle says he has learned from the events in the last couple of years. In addition to about 40 pounds he put on while in office, Boyle says he has gained a new focus on what's important. Since the recall, he says, he has spent more time with his wife and family.

"A crisis in a family — and to some degree it was for all of us — again, it pulls you apart or makes you stronger. It made us stronger. And a lot closer. A lot more caring."

A heart problem — Boyle suffered a near-fatal heart attack in October 1984 — apparently is under control and Boyle, the private citizen, still speaks at political gatherings.

Boyle says he is taking that life one day at a time — with no plans about his future.

"You can fret about what's going to happen next week," Boyle says. "But I think it's better just to take one day at a time and handle what you've got."

Boyle leans his 6-foot frame back in his high-backed chair, hazel eyes gazing at some point beyond the walls, beyond the window.

Perhaps he's thinking about the names, numbers and dates on his desk and another stack in a drawer.

Or maybe he's going over his plans to take the afternoon off with his wife. Or just pondering the unusually warm January day.

Near the office window — an opening to the clear sky — sits a mounted slogan:

"Our greatest glory in life, consists not in never failing but in rising every time we fail."