

 **2008 VOTE: MAYOR**

Sanders made career of public service

Former police chief seeks second term

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May 13, 2008

SAN DIEGO – Mayor Jerry Sanders' image as an all-around nice guy survived 26 years with the San Diego Police Department and a foray into politics six years later, when a central criticism was that he was too nice.

That notion took a hit last month when he swore at the main threat to his re-election, businessman Steve Francis, and refused to shake his hand after a debate. The exchange lifted the fairly typical campaign preceding the June 3 election to new levels of coarse discourse.

“I hope this is not the defining issue, that it really becomes the issues that are important, but the public's pretty funny about some things,” Sanders said.

He would know. His is a long career of public involvement, spanning his blue-collar police background, consecutive stints leading local chapters of the United Way and the American Red Cross and his service at City Hall.

“Until I got into politics, people felt that I had pretty strong character,” Sanders said. “That was before they assaulted it every day.”

Eric Bruvold, who was a Sanders aide before working for a think tank founded by Francis, said he wasn't going to endorse either candidate until Sanders swore at the forum at Balboa Park and an aide later denied it happened.

“That wasn't the Jerry I had worked for and deeply respected,” Bruvold said.

“To me, that ignores some important lessons about democracy,” Bruvold said. “Politics is rough-and-tumble and for the good of everybody – that's why we have these rituals like shaking hands and acknowledging your opponents.”

But banker Tom Wornham, a board member of the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce and San Diego Regional Economic Development Corp., understood the frustration Sanders felt being pummeled by his opponent and said, “If people think that is the vision into Jerry Sanders' soul, they are very wrong.”



LAURA EMBRY / Union-Tribune
 Mayor Jerry Sanders (right) greeted 9-week-old Mason Moeller as his father, Chris, and campaign worker Penny Fuller looked on during a campaign stop.

Sanders said he never planned on entering politics but instead was called to serve. The day Mayor Dick Murphy resigned in 2005 amid worsening finances, dozens of calls came in.

“This is the time,” supporters told him. “We just need somebody who's got San Diego's best interests at heart.”

This campaign is different because Sanders, 57, has never had a political record to defend. But assaults are nothing new to a cop from a family of cops.

Sanders' father was a police officer for 26 years. He was mainly a motor cop in the Los Angeles Police Department, but he also served as a bodyguard to two state attorneys general, Evelle Younger and George Deukmejian.

Sanders remembers the Watts Riots, when his father would come home exhausted after 18-hour shifts; once, a firefighter asked Sanders' father to lend him a gun because people had been shooting at him as he was trying to put out fires.

Sanders was 15 and impressionable.

His sister is now a saleswoman at a door factory, and his brother is an Oscar-nominated art director (for “Bram Stoker's Dracula” and “Saving Private Ryan”), but Sanders always wanted to be like his dad.

Sanders ended up at San Diego State University in 1970, but his most memorable day there was his last, the day he entered the police academy. He was so eager to become a cop that he quit school a few months before graduating because he didn't want to miss the opportunity.

Yet others would slip by. He was passed over for promotions nearly two dozen times and once even sued the San Diego Police Department, alleging unfair promotion practices.

He dropped his suit after being promoted to sergeant in 1979, but in the years that followed, Sanders was passed over for promotions again: five times for lieutenant and three times for captain.

It happened so often he was called “the pass-over candidate” until he became chief and began telling others they would have to persevere to get promoted.

“At times I felt like I was banging my head against a wall, but I also felt very strongly about the Police Department and what we were doing and what was needed,” Sanders said.

In 1988, he finally earned his degree at National University, keeping a promise he made to his dad.

Twenty years later, he's trying to prove he can keep promises from his 2005 campaign. It hasn't been easy. He has yet to catch up on San Diego's delayed annual audits and restore the city's credit rating. He's also granted raises to police and fire unions despite calling for four years of pay freezes for all city employees.

He acknowledges that progress has been slow and that some of his commitments are incomplete, and Francis' ever-present TV advertising won't let anyone forget it.

Clairemont Mesa community planning expert Dave Potter said he is leaning toward supporting Francis

because Sanders waited too long to stop a 2005 donor from building an office tower in Kearny Mesa that exceeded an aviation height limit.

“Francis is self-funded, and that's good and that's bad,” Potter said. “The good side is that he's truly not beholden to anybody, whereas I think that Sanders is.”

But businessman Duane Roth, a prominent Francis supporter in 2005, said the city is better off letting the incumbent forge ahead.

“I believe Mayor Sanders has done a particularly good job in terms of getting the city stabilized and getting the confidence back,” Roth said.

“He always has this sense of integrity, credibility. It's part of who he is, his experience on the police force, walking into some real messes.”

Sanders said he never consciously cultivated his image.

“If people perceive you as being fair and approachable and personable, then you get that label,” he said.

Although some voters he meets “think of a mayor of a major city as being some porcelain figure that only certain people are allowed to come in and view,” Sanders said he's “pretty ordinary.”

“I've always treated people very fairly,” he said. “I've always told them what I thought, and I've always been pretty direct.”

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