

'Ernie Day' surprise party honors altruist's work for children, families

By Eleanor Pierce / *The Bulletin*

Published: January 10, 2009 4:00AM PST

The Deschutes County Domestic Violence Council celebrated a new holiday Friday: "Ernie Day."

Members of the council created the one-time holiday to honor Ernest "Ernie" Mazorol. They ordered an award, sent out invitations and made a banner that read "Thank you Ernie!" It was decorated with drawings by kids from the Saving Grace shelter for women and children.

But they told Mazorol he was just attending a meeting over coffee.

So "Ernie Day" was kicked off with a shout, as about 20 people gathered in the atrium of the Minnesota Market Building beside Thump Coffee called out "Surprise!" as a stunned Mazorol entered the room.

"Thanks everybody for coming," he replied, once the applause died down.

"I don't know what you're here for."

The group honoring Mazorol on Friday included staff members of many local social service and government organizations, judges and Deschutes County Commissioner Tammy Baney.

They came to recognize Mazorol, the trial court administrator for Deschutes County Circuit Court, for his work on behalf of children and families in Central Oregon, and to watch as he was presented with an award from the domestic violence council.

Why Mazorol?

"I think it's important to highlight effective people who make our society better," said Janet Huerta, executive director of Saving Grace.

Mazorol, who turns 60 next month, has been the trial court administrator for Deschutes County since 1984; he's the second-longest sitting trial court administrator in the state.



Rob Kerr The Bulletin

Deschutes County Trial Court Administrator Ernest Mazorol, with Saving Grace's Executive Director Janet Huerta, was surprised Friday with a party to honor his leadership helping children and families in Deschutes County.

In 2002, he received the Distinguished Service Award from the National Center for State Courts. But it's not just effective court administration that's gotten the attention of the local family and domestic violence services community.

"Really, it goes back to his passion," said Marybeth Jaeger, administrative analyst and Mazorol's assistant. "His passion is really children and families."

He's demonstrated that passion through his work implementing a family court and a family drug court, both of which aim to link cases and services for families in trouble.

On top of that, he serves on numerous committees like the State Family Law Advisory Committee and the state Domestic and Sexual Violence Services Advisory Council, and he was instrumental in the creation of Mary's Place. Mary's Place was created to combat post-separation domestic violence by offering a neutral center for divorced or separated parents to exchange custody of children or have court-ordered supervised visits. It served 69 families and hosted more than 1,000 supervised visits and safe exchanges in 2008.

Mazorol's passion for children and families comes from his own experiences.

Growing up in Houston, Mazorol's mother wasn't around, and his father didn't keep close tabs on him.

"I come from a broken up family," he said, and for a while, the future didn't look good. "I was running pretty free."

It took him "about 10 years" of night school to finish his bachelor's degree. He said he feels lucky to have made it to where he has in life.

He's been married to Shelley Johnson for 30 years, and it was when the couple's son, Sean Mazorol, was born in 1985 that "it just kind of hit him," Johnson said. He wanted other kids to have the same opportunities that his son did.

The way Mazorol saw it, "Our son was blessed, and why can't other children be blessed? Why do they have to live in an abusive situation?" Johnson said.

When asked about how the birth of his son awakened his passion for youth and families, Mazorol had to pause and take a breath.

"It kind of grounded me. I had a son. I didn't want the same thing to happen to him that happened to me. I just wanted to give something back."

So he started taking on projects as a representative of the court, far beyond his required duties, and applying his passion for families.

In the case of the advisory committee for Mary's Place, "He didn't just come," said Huerta. "He was a leader."

But "Ernie's a behind-the-scenes sort of person," said Deschutes County Circuit Court Presiding Judge Michael Sullivan. "He's extremely good at what he does," like coming up with permanent funding for important services or helping startup organizations find partners.

"He knows how to massage the system so it better serves families," said Diane Treadway, who also presented him with a plaque from the Deschutes County Commission on Children and Families at the "Ernie Day" celebration.

But because the work Mazorol does is largely behind the scenes, it doesn't always get noticed, which his wife thinks is fine.

"He's kind of like one of those unsung heroes," she said. "He doesn't do it for the accolades; he's just looking for results."

Eleanor Pierce can be reached at 541-383-0361 or epierce@bendbulletin.com.

Published Daily in Bend Oregon by Western Communications, Inc. © 2008

www.bendbulletin.com