

Support remains, critics withhold barbs after Headley's plea agreement

By MITCHELL KLINE
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FRANKLIN — The new man in charge of the Williamson County Sheriff's Office said his first priority is to "keep this department going like it has for the last six years."



While it won't be official until Houston Naron Jr., chairman of the County Commission, accepts Ricky Headley's resignation, Chief Deputy Dusty Rhoades will have command of the department until county commissioners appoint a replacement.

County officials say there's a good chance that a new sheriff could be elected on Aug. 7. That person would serve until Aug. 31, 2010, when Headley's term would have expired.

With his attorney, David Raybin, Williamson County Sheriff Ricky Headley lowers his head as he pleads guilty to five misdemeanor charges in Williamson County Circuit Court on Wednesday. As part of his plea agreement, his resignation is effective immediately

Headley on Wednesday entered a guilty plea to five misdemeanor counts and agreed to resign. He will serve five years of probation, undergo drug and alcohol addiction assessment and will not run for political office, according to the plea agreement he reached with prosecutors.

He was facing 37 counts in Davidson and Williamson counties, 21 of which were felonies. Deputy District Attorney Derek Smith said prosecutors' main objective was to remove Headley from office.

"The people of this community were embarrassed by this situation," Smith said. "That was our top priority."

Headley's attorney, David Raybin, said the former sheriff became addicted to pain pills after experiencing back problems. Raybin said Headley has been in treatment and counseling for addiction since his arrest. Headley will pursue a career in gospel music, according to Raybin.

Rhoades said he and the rest of the deputies at the Sheriff's Department were shocked to learn about Headley's addiction to drugs. Headley, who was elected in 2002 and again in 2006, ran on a platform of being tough on drugs.

"We've probably been painted with a broad brush, but what one person did should not affect the entire department," Rhoades said. "We had no control over this."

Rhoades would not say whether he thought Headley should have remained in office after his arrest on Jan. 31, 2007.

Even some of Headley's most outspoken critics kept their reactions to themselves yesterday.

Among those remaining mum was County Commissioner Jeff Ford, who last year expressed doubts over Headley's ability to lead in light of the charges leveled against him.

"I'm going to let it go," Ford said. "I'm not sure that any of us has anything to gain by saying anything at this point."

Brentwood Police Chief Ricky Watson publicly called for the sheriff to step down last spring but opted Wednesday to instead focus on the future of the office.

"I'm just hoping that basically the County Commission appoints Chief Rhoades as acting sheriff until the next election so he can restore faith in the department," Watson said. "I've known Dusty for a long time, and he has always been forthright and upstanding. He's been with the department a long time and has survived many different changes in sheriff."

Franklin Police Chief Jackie Moore said Headley's resignation would help restore people's faith in law enforcement. Moore also had called for Headley to leave the department.

"My hope is — and commitment is — for the Williamson County Sheriff's Department to recover," Moore said. "I have every good hope for those professional men and women and pledge that everything we can do in the Franklin Police Department and working as a team with that agency will be done."

Ministry, music beckon

Several of Headley's longtime supporters reiterated their support and expressed regret that the sheriff's service has come to an end.

"Those of us who supported Ricky have supported him because he's Ricky, not because he's the sheriff," said friend Buddy Victory. "We all feel that he has to do what is best for he and his family. My support for him didn't come because I was trying to get him to remain sheriff, but because I support him as a person."

Other Headley advocates predict more big changes in the former lawman's future, including possible careers in the ministry or with his beloved Southern gospel music.

Extracting himself from the stress of the public glare and growing scrutiny surrounding his legal woes, Headley's greatest benefit will be peace of mind, some said.

"I'm glad for him that he's out from under the stress of it all," said Bobby Bennett, a longtime friend. "I hate that we're losing the best sheriff we've ever had, but if this is what's best, then I'm glad for him."

Bennett said he has spent "a good amount of time praying and talking" with Headley over the past two weeks about the possibility of resigning. The decision, Bennett said, was not made lightly but has left Headley at ease.

"He believes that there are other things for him to do, and I think he realized that being sheriff is not what God wanted for him anymore," Bennett said. "I believe he will go into the ministry. Ricky was a really faithful churchgoer for a long time . . . and being sheriff took a lot of time. Maybe he drifted away from that, and I feel like he wants to go back to that person he used to be."

Rusty Trotter, Headley's pastor at Grassland Heights Baptist Church in Franklin, said Headley's "poor decision" should not have cost him his job.

"I don't understand all the legal ins and outs of this, because I just deal with people," Trotter said. "I hate that it came to this, and I don't know that our county will be able to have a finer person as our sheriff — an honest and good man."

TIMELINE: 20 YEARS IN LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

1988: Headley moves to Williamson County after working as a police officer in his hometown of Alabaster, Ala. He is hired as a deputy by Sheriff Fleming Williams.

1990: Sheriff Lance Saylor promotes Headley to detective sergeant.

1994: Headley runs for District 8 county commissioner and is defeated, as is his boss, Sheriff Saylor. The new sheriff, Bill Le Cates, demotes him from detective to a lower-paying jailer job. Headley resigns and sues Le Cates in federal court for \$500,000. The lawsuit is settled for an undisclosed amount.

1996: Headley is active in the Grassland Athletic Association baseball program and serves as a detective with the Fairview Police Department.

2000: Accepts job as chief of police in Spring Hill but stays on the job only nine days before returning to Fairview.

2002: Runs for sheriff against Le Cates on a get-tough-on-drugs platform and wins in May Republican primary.

Sept. 2002: After taking office, Headley demotes Le Cates supporter Darrell Cagle from lieutenant to patrol officer. Cagle sues the Sheriff's Department in December.

March 2003: Hospitalized for chest pain. Doctors diagnose blockage.

Oct. 2003: Fights against a work-release program that would allow jail inmates to maintain employment while incarcerated. Brings back "zebra stripe" uniforms for work details outside the jail.

Dec. 2003: Performs with George Jones at Williamson County Ag Expo Park.

Jan. 2004: Launches an initiative to put tracking bracelets on Alzheimer's patients with severe dementia.

July 2005: Hires his son, Ricky Jr., to be a deputy detailed to courthouse security.

March 2005: Headley and his Pure Country band headline a concert at Ryman Auditorium.

Aug. 2005: Headley and Pure Country open for George Jones at the first Williamson County Fair in 55 years.

Nov. 2005: Cagle, the officer demoted by Headley for supporting his opponent in 2002, announces that he will run against Headley in 2006, accusing the sheriff of nepotism and wasteful spending.

May 2006: Headley defeats Cagle in a landslide, getting 80 percent of the vote.

Jan. 2007: TBI agents and Metro Nashville detectives arrest Headley. He is accused of obtaining prescription drugs illegally at a south Nashville pharmacy that already was the subject of a TBI investigation. Headley says he is addicted to painkillers because of back pain and goes into a rehab program for several weeks.

Feb. 2007: Brentwood Police Chief Ricky Watson and Franklin Police Chief Jackie Moore call for Headley to step down.

March 2007: Headley pledges to supporters at a dinner at Sperry's Restaurant in Cool Springs organized by automobile dealer R.C. Alexander that he will work to regain the trust of the public.

Oct. 2007: Davidson County Grand Jury indicts Headley on 33 counts of obtaining drugs illegally. Williamson County Grand Jury indicts him on four counts of official misconduct. Headley supporters, including uniformed deputies, rally on the courthouse steps.

Nov. 2007: Local Fraternal Order of Police chapter moves to expel Headley.

Jan. 2008: More than 500 people attend a benefit concert for Headley's legal defense.

Feb. 12: Headley calls his command staff together in the morning to announce that he will resign. At noon, he assembles other officers and staff at the Ag Expo Park and tells them he will step down.

Feb. 13: Headley resigns as part of a plea agreement in Williamson County Court.