



Front Page

Returning to his roots

Lawrence leaves public policy institute to go back to journalism

By Blackwell Thomas, The Southern

Sunday, October 26, 2008 11:23 PM CDT

After 11 years administering and teaching at the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Mike Lawrence is leaving to return to his roots.

Lawrence, who has spent the last four years as the institute's director, said recently that it's been a rewarding experience, but Friday will be his last day at the institute.

For the man who started publishing his own newspaper when he was 11 years old, the call to return to journalism is too strong to resist.

"I feel most comfortable being a journalist, and I am really at the point in my life where I am ready to return to my roots," he said. "I also think the state of Illinois is in a very precarious situation and I think there are a lot of important decisions ahead for the state and I'd like to offer some of my views."

Those views happen to be among the most respected in all of Illinois politics, said former Chicago Sun-Times reporter Charlie Wheeler III, who has covered Illinois politics and government for four decades and worked with Lawrence when the two reported from the Capitol in Springfield.

"I think Mike's one of the best reporters I ever met," said Wheeler. "Mike was someone who was respected by Republicans and Democrats as a reporter because he was seen as somebody who took the time to understand the issues."

Wheeler, who now directs the Public Affairs Reporting Program at University of Illinois Springfield, added: "Mike wanted the solid meat and potato stuff, and that's what he presented to his readers."

Many of those who know Lawrence say it's difficult to sum up his career and do his accomplishments proper justice.

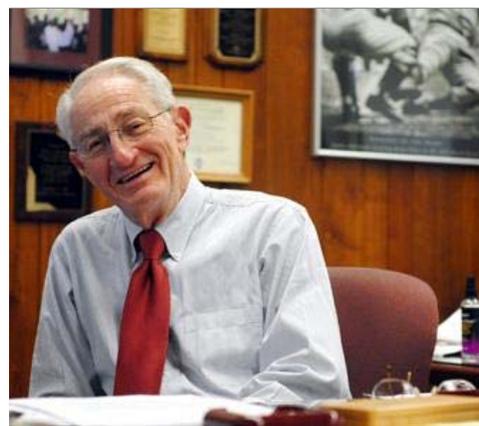
Some say it speaks volumes that legendary U.S. Sen. Paul Simon handpicked Lawrence to assist him at the institute.

Reporters compliment Lawrence for maintaining his renowned reputation for integrity even after making the leap from journalism to the "dark side" when he became a press secretary and senior advisor to Gov. Jim Edgar.

Academics commend Lawrence for his leadership in successfully guiding the institute on its path toward "finding new ways of solving some very old problems" after Simon's unexpected death in 2003.

When asked about Lawrence, Edgar echoed those superlatives.

"Integrity can be an over-used word," he said. "But I don't know of anybody in any profession who demonstrated integrity as much as Mike Lawrence."



Mike Lawrence is leaving Southern Illinois University Carbondale after 11 years as director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute.(THOMAS BARKER / THE SOUTHERN)

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When asked what people might not know about Lawrence, Edgar responded quickly.

"Mike would never skip a meal," he said. "You could have crisis, but Mike was going to lunch. I always had a great deal of respect for that priority."

That priority came about after Lawrence began suffering stomach problems and, to combat the ailment, his doctor instructed him to start eating lunch away from his desk.

Professor John Jackson has known Lawrence for 25 years and has worked with him at the institute. He said it was Lawrence's smooth leadership that helped guide the school in the wake of Simon's death.

"We reached a critical crossroad when Paul Simon died," he said. "But (Lawrence) did an extraordinary job executing what Paul put in place and putting his own stamp on the job and the direction of the institute."

Simon's daughter, Sheila, who is a professor at SIUC's School of Law, said her father held Lawrence in high esteem and that the sentiment was well placed.

"Dad trusted him a great deal and I think this is what dad had in mind, picking someone who could step in and do the work," she said. "Dad wanted to have continuity at the policy institute and I think it says a whole lot about Mike that he's been able to accomplish that and more."

She added: "Dad had it easy, being a U.S. senator. Mike did all the things he's done without that in his pocket and because of that, he's solidified the institute and made it that much easier for the next person to take over."

Lawrence said that while he's looking forward to resuming his career in journalism, he will miss working with students, particularly those he's mentored and those who "overcame so many obstacles just to get here."

"As a journalist, you write for thousands of people, but you don't really have a great opportunity to make the difference on a one-on-one basis," he said. "I've had that opportunity here."

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