

Sheriff Pierini calling it a career after 40+ years

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Violence on New Year’s Eve at Stateline used to be the norm. People were struck by flying Champagne bottles. One year someone was shot. Disobedience ruled. At the peak about 100,000 people filled the casino corridor – many of them underage.

Closing Highway 50 at the bewitching hour and then long enough to clear the throng of revelers was Ron Pierini’s idea – and that was when there were just a couple thousand revelers.

This is just one of many ideas Pierini has had through the years that has helped the men and women who work for Douglas County Sheriff’s Office.

Today New Year’s Eve at Stateline is nothing to write home about – which is fine for law enforcement. Still, they prepare for the worst – especially with terrorism now always being a real possibility.

“There’s been many New Year’s Eve nights where the sheriff and I were out of doors at observation posts watching the crowd and I’m thinking to myself, here is a dedicated elected official being out in the cold after being so many years as sheriff,” South Lake Tahoe Police Chief Brian Uhler said of Pierini.

It’s that kind of dedication to the job, really to the community, that has made him so electable by the people of Douglas County and respected by those outside the agency who work with him.

Pierini has had an incredible career, with the bulk of it

spent at DCSO.

A year from now Pierini will retire as sheriff of DCSO, a position he has had since 1997 when he was appointed to replace Sheriff Jerry Maple. He is finishing his fifth elected term.



Douglas County Sheriff Ron Pierini is retiring when his term expires in 2018. Photo/Kathryn Reed

A storied career

Pierini grew up in Northern Nevada, graduated from UNR and started his career with the Carson City Sheriff's Office. He came to Douglas in July 1976 as a deputy at the Lake Tahoe substation, which at the time was on Warrior Way. He worked there for 18 years, rising to the rank of captain. Then he went to the Carson Valley for three years where he was undersheriff for Maple.

"The community up here was very strong," Pierini said of Tahoe.

Things have changed in his 40-plus years as an officer. Back in the day, Tahoe was responsible for 80 percent of the county's crime. Now it's 20 percent.

Traffic was worse then. Before the loop road it could take two hours to get from the old substation through the casino corridor. There was more of a permanent population at the lake.

Pierini is proud to claim that Douglas has the lowest crime rate of any county in the state. Instituting programs and providing officers with the appropriate tools are how that's been achieved.

Gang activity and drugs are issues Pierini has no tolerance for. In the 1990s when he started to see some unsavory types try to stake their territory here, he set up a gang task force. It stopped the problem.

"I've lived in Nevada my whole life. I don't understand why we've legalized marijuana," Pierini told *Lake Tahoe News* during a wide-ranging conversation. He believes it will just escalate the use of harder drugs. "We say it's OK and it's not OK.

"As time goes on we will see traffic accidents and people will die."

Fatal car accidents in the county are already an issue, with eight people having lost their lives this year.

Pierini is all about early drug education. He goes to every DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) graduation. This is a program for grade school students.

"They go home and I wonder if their parents are using drugs," he said.

Pierini is known for his blunt talk, which depending on who's on the receiving end may not be welcome.

“The characteristic that I will always attribute to the sheriff is his unfailing straightforwardness. You never get a couched answer from Ron, you get the facts, whether pleasant or otherwise,” Bill Chernock with the Carson Valley Chamber of Commerce told *Lake Tahoe News*. Those two have a history that goes back to when they both worked at the lake.

Memorable cases

Like most in law enforcement, Pierini finds crimes involving children to be some of the most difficult to comprehend. Krystal Steadman is one of those cases.

“It hit me so hard and all of Lake Tahoe,” Pierini said of the 9-year-old who was raped and murdered in 2000 by a father and son duo. She was a fourth-grader at Meyers Elementary School when the pair abducted her. “It’s one of the worst things that ever happened.”

Then there was the shootout in 1982, with shots being fired as officers and the bad guys sped along Highway 50; glass was falling on Pierini.

The suspects drove into a garage in Round Hill. When they came out they continued to lead officers on a pursuit up Spooner Summit, all the while shots are being fired. The suspects drove off the side of the road and then came out with their hands up.

The woman from the house in Round Hill – an innocent victim in the melee – was in the car. Officers didn’t know that until she stepped out of the vehicle. She had been on the floor during the shootings and was lucky to not have been struck.

In 1980, Pierini was the captain at the Tahoe substation when Harveys was bombed. It was the largest bomb to go off in the United States until the World Trade Center bombing in 1993.

“It was a big deal. We saved 600 people,” Pierini said.

Sonny Bono's death in 1998 at Heavenly ski resort gave him a taste of mass media. As sheriff, he is who people wanted to talk to.

"Every media truck from around the world was at Heavenly," Pierini recalled. Journalists wanted to know if this was an assassination or if drugs were involved. "It was just that he hit a tree."

Bono was a congressman at the time, but was still widely known as the other half of Sonny and Cher.

Oftentimes the Tahoe Douglas Fire Protection District is part of the drama that is unfolding. Pierini and now retired Fire Chief Ben Sharit had very different jobs, but often were involved in the same altercation.

"I always had access to him which was amazing with how busy he was," Sharit told *LTN*. "He was apolitical in a political position. I value his commitment to public safety."

Moving on

While those are a few of the big cases Pierini has been involved with, it's more administrative work that he does today. It's dealing with the budget. It's making sure the state-mandated body camera program for officers is carried out. This means figuring out how to store all that data – and paying for the equipment, and dealing with the fact the recordings will be a public record.

At 65, Pierini looks like he could still tangle with any bad guy he encountered. And while that's not necessarily what he wants to do in his last year, he also hasn't started counting down the days to December 2018.

"I'm not looking forward to retiring," he said. Still, he knows now is the time to go. It may give others in the department a chance to do new things. Undersheriff Paul Howell will also

be retiring next year.

And it means he can spend more time traveling with his wife, seeing their kids and grandchildren. And Pierini's 91-year-old mother lives in Carson City, so now he'll have more time for her as well when he no longer has a job that is essentially 24 hours, seven days a week.