



Gary Niebur leaves lasting impact on Edwardsville YMCA and his home city

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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First in stories about the impact of Edwardsville CEO/president and former Edwardsville Mayor Gary Niebur and personal insights on his home city as he approaches his retirement.

EDWARDSVILLE - There have been few in Edwardsville's history over the past three-plus decades who have had the same influence as Gary Niebur.

Niebur, a previous mayor, city councilman, alderman and long-time president and CEO /president of the Edwardsville YMCA, has played a hand in almost every accomplishment in the city and the YMCA since he started as YMCA president in 1982. He is also a past president of the Illinois Municipal League in 2002 and was on the Municipal League Board of Directors from 1993 to 2013. Niebur also held offices of vice president, sergeant-at-arms and first vice president.

It was Gary's experience with the Illinois Municipal League touring the state city to city that helped him realize how fortunate he was to be mayor of such a wonderful community.

"Back in 2002, I was elected president of Illinois Municipal League in the state of Illinois. I enjoyed that experience for a lot of reasons. I spent a lot of time traveling to cities small and large, north to south, east to west in Illinois. I never failed when driving home to look forward to coming home and counting my blessings about the challenges I faced in this community. What I witnessed was we were opposite of the challenges 90 percent of our state had. Our problems were growth, parking downtown, needing better highways having to improve streets. The problems I found most cities had were the opposite; couldn't keep a business in town or draw a new business to town or convince their own residents to stay in town.

"When I got back, this isn't that bad. Our problems are the opposite of most have. That stuck with me most of my life here."

Much of Niebur's time as Edwardsville mayor was spent working to alleviate traffic problems on Illinois Route 159 and 157 and develop those areas business wise.

"I spent a lot of time trying to get the state to fulfill their commitment to state highways," he said. "It worked, we got somewhere around \$50 million to fund state highways. I learned from that process you have to be persistent to get results and not give up."

Niebur is also proud of what Downtown Edwardsville has become.

“Back in the 1980s or early 1990s when I started my tenure as mayor, Downtown Edwardsville wasn’t what downtown is today. I remember walking down main street and there were a lot of vacant buildings and sidewalk gaps. That isn’t the case today. With the amazing support of people on city council and the community, if you look at Edwardsville today we have one of the more impressive downtown areas.”

Niebur said another thing that was important is that during his time the city tried to prepare for the future, establishing an aggressive annexation policy.

“We wanted things to be done on our standards as we became bigger,” he said. “We annexed thousands of acres of farmland while I was mayor. Growing just to get bigger made no sense. We had to have standards in place to grow at a high level. If you look at the end product, I think it paid off. We are also fortunate to have the city personnel we have had and have today at all levels of service and government.”

Niebur took over as the YMCA director at age 28. He said he had no idea he would be at the helm as long as he has been when he started his career.

“I felt like I could contribute to make the Y a better place,” he said. “When I started the Y was just to the pool of the Esic building. It was a very similar story and situation I had with the city. I was fortunate to have great mentors and friends and people who loved the Y and the growth has been amazing and not just in square footage.”

When Niebur started, his first hire was Edwardsville YMCA Breakers swim team head coach Bob Rettle. He said Rettle was in Northern Illinois and wanted the YMCA swim coach job.

“Bob was my first pick here,” Niebur said. “He was very grateful and I never forget him saying, Mr. Niebur I promise to do a good job.”

Niebur said Rettle has been extraordinarily successful with the YMCA Breakers, taking the team to heights on a national scale he never imagined.

“The only thing about Bob, is Bob looks the same as he did 30 years ago and I don’t,” Niebur laughed.

Mark Motley, President of the YMCA Board, said Gary has led the YMCA through exceptional growth, expansion and success for 35 years, in addition to serving as mayor of Edwardsville for 20 years from 1993-2013.

“We are grateful to Gary for his vision, leadership and compassion for his employees, the community and the Y’s mission over the past three decades,” Motley said. “Gary

created the area's premier community center where everyone is welcome. He leaves behind a legacy of programs and facilities that have made our community a better place. Please join me in congratulating him on a prolific career, a job well done and best wishes for an enjoyable retirement."

Note: Niebur is the recipient of numerous community service awards, including: Jaycees Ten Outstanding Young Persons in the State of Illinois; Rotary Club International Paul Harris Fellowship Award; the Boy Scouts of America Distinguished Citizens Award; SIUE Religious Center Interfaith Award; and the Edwardsville/Glen Carbon Chamber of Commerce Lifetime Achievement Award.

Next: More about Niebur's YMCA career, including development of the YMCA facilities.