

Cramer's life a life well-lived, his friends say

If honesty, integrity, faith in God, strength through leadership, having a vision for future prosperity and standing firm against evil while advocating for the weak are qualities of a successful life, then retiring U.S. Rep. Robert E. "Bud" Cramer has proven himself worthy of them all, say his friends and acquaintances.

The early years

"Bud who? Oh... he's the one in the Boy Scout picture with the big ears," quips long-time friend Mike Gillespie, seven-time Madison County Commission chairman. Merely three months Cramer's senior, Gillespie has known Cramer since they were both in kindergarten. "He refers to me as his older friend, but he had gray hair long before I."

Their friendship grew from Cub Scout campfires to Boy Scout badges in the 1950s and early 1960s. The Huntsville Cramers and the Gillespie clan were multi-generational friends, with the Gillespies living down the street from Cramer's grandparents, who owned a grocery store on Pulaski Pike.

"We shared a lot of the same interests growing up and my family bought groceries at Bud's grandfather's store," Gillespie says.

They both attended the University of

Alabama, where Cramer went on to get his law degree in 1972. Following his turn at military duty as a tank officer at Fort Knox, Ky., Cramer returned to Huntsville where he served as assistant district attorney from 1973 until entering private practice in 1975. Cramer has spent a lifetime as an active member of the Methodist Church, where he taught Sunday school classes to young people.

"Neither of us, growing up, discussed politics or had aspirations to public office, at least that I knew of," Gillespie says. "But a group of friends approached me in the early 1980s about running for Madison County commissioner. I won. Friends encouraged Bud to run for DA the same year. He won."

"Working as the assistant district attorney early in my career allowed me to see the benefits of public service," says Cramer. "I ran for DA with the confidence I could bring new ideas to the table. After I ran for and won the job, I not only wanted to be a strong prosecutor, but also wanted to expand the role of a DA."

Two young professionals

"We worked at the Madison County Courthouse for the next 10 years, where our lives continued to so parallel each other, it was uncanny," says Gillespie. They had daughters the same age, Hollan

Cramer and Kim Gillespie, and because they were the young upstarts at the courthouse, they found themselves often attending or speaking at the same events and fundraisers.

"In spite of our not looking anything at all alike, we became inseparable in people's minds," Gillespie says. "I used to joke they had just paroled two inmates down the hall from my office and Bud would respond with, 'Yeah, well they just delivered a truck load of gravel outside mine.'"

When Bud's father had a gun accident that injured his leg, Gillespie remembers visiting him in the hospital.

"Bud and I were coming down the elevator together and a lady turned to me and said, 'Bud, I am relieved to hear your Dad is doing well,' he says. "Not wanting to embarrass her, I thanked her; but then she turned to Bud and said, 'And Mike, how have you been?'"

Like a Martin and Lewis team for the 1980s, Gillespie and Cramer swallowed



About this section

For over 17 years, retiring U.S. Rep. Robert E. "Bud" Cramer has served the Tennessee Valley and contributed to its stellar growth by being a steady and faithful advocate in Washington, D.C. This section is a look back on his contributions to the area and its growth.

goldfish for charity, which thoroughly humiliated their teenage daughters, and accepted an invitation to be informally adopted by Huntsville's great Southern cooking icon, Aunt Eunice Merrell.

"Aunt Eunice threw a party for us at her restaurant, Aunt Eunice's Kitchen, after one of my campaigns," Mike says. "Bud and I both thought of her as a loving grandmother."

According to Gillespie, it was during his term as district attorney that Cramer first talked about an idea he had.

"One major area as DA where I saw the

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need for improvement was in how the court system treated children," Cramer says. "I wanted to protect abused children, so I began to create the model of what would become the first Children's Advocacy Center."

Gillespie and Cramer continued to mix serious business with a little fun all through the 1980s.

"It was important to me that Bud turn 40 first, since he was already gray," Gillespie says. "So on his 39th birthday, I lined up the media to come out and make a huge deal of it's being his 40th. He was honored but informed everyone it was not his 40th!"

But turnaround is fair play and when Gillespie did turn 40, Cramer made a big show of it by decorating his office with dead floral and black crepe wreaths while instigating all his employees to dress in mourning.

"He got me good, I must admit," Gillespie tells on himself. "I thought that was it, everyone wearing black, ha ha ha. But due to a string of recent incidents, the courthouse was under high security at the time and Bud sent the sheriff to my office, informing me he was instructed to escort me under guard out of the building. I flew down the steps to the basement on the north side of the courthouse, and as I



Courtesy Mike Gillespie

Mike Gillespie, left, looks on as Bud Cramer points them out in a Boy Scout group photo.

came out into the parking lot, there was local TV anchor Dick Curtis with a helicopter, TV cameras, lights, and a megaphone, announcing, 'Commissioner Mike Gillespie turns 40!'"

But Gillespie and Cramer's friendship wasn't always so fun. The long illness and ultimate passing of Bud's wife, Pat, was a dark time for everyone close to him.

"He is a great friend and we truly care about each other. We have been there for each other during the good times as well as the bad," Gillespie says.

On to Capitol Hill In 1991, when Cramer ran as a conservative Democrat in

his first congressional race and won the 5th District seat for North Alabama in the House of Representatives. It was during these years he was able to push the envelope on a lot of issues he had been working for as DA.

"It opened doors for him to push the National Children's Advocacy Centers to a new level of national recognition," says Center Executive Director Chris Newlin.

"I've used the same approach I used as DA while in Washington, and looked for ways to serve North Alabama beyond the typical definition of a congressman," Cramer says. "Economic development was a natural fit for me. Early in my career in Congress, I became involved in job recruitment - first with US Gypsum in Jackson County, but also many others including Boeing in Decatur, Toyota in Huntsville, and most recently the HudsonAlpha Institute. I've had the opportunity to work on these and many other projects as part of our state and local team. Many members of Congress don't get involved in this type of work, but I think it's an important component of my role to represent all the people of North Alabama."

Mayor Loretta Spencer remembers well the significance of Cramer's moving from Madison County DA - where he was always focused on children's advocacy and making Huntsville a prosperous region economically - to an influential congressional seat.

"His position on the House Appropriations Committee helped us secure FEMA funding and Economic Development Initiative grants," she says, "to address problems, renovate old parts of downtown Huntsville, and revitalize the Von Braun Center."

Cramer's early political views had him

supportive of the Democratic Party, but in 1994, he found himself skirting many liberal issues in a close re-election. Today, he breaks with his party on issues concerning abortion, gay rights and gun control, as well as business regulation, the environment and taxes. He was one of only four Democrats to vote for the 2003 bill to cut taxes.

As a founding member of the conservative Blue Dog Democrats, Cramer has been pressed during his career by his Republican counterparts to change parties. He remains a conservative Democrat. His positions include staunch support of missile defense and space exploration, and he has worked tirelessly for research and economic development throughout North Alabama.

"True friendships are very rare, but mine and Bud's really has spanned the distance of time and continents," Gillespie reflects. "After Bud was elected to Congress in 1991, we found ourselves standing on a remote street corner in China where we were both on a recruiting mission. We hadn't seen each other in quite some time. We started talking and the conversation picked up right where it left off last time we saw each other at the courthouse."

What comes next?

Cramer's announcement he would not seek re-election stunned many people, and some still ask, why now?

But as Chris Newlin says, "Bud Cramer is a somewhat behind-the-scenes mover and shaker." So what will the future bring the retiring congressman?

"I definitely will still be involved with what goes on in North Alabama," Cramer says. "I've enjoyed advocating for our community over the 18 years I've been in Congress, and I have no plans to retire and relax in a cabin in the woods."

"I plan to be engaged in community issues and economic development across North Alabama. The experience I've gained with recruiting new industries to the region will be beneficial after I leave Congress. I have good relationships with industry and government leaders, and I hope to utilize those relationships to continue bringing more jobs to Alabama."

Congressman Cramer,

Thank you for your unwavering support of hands-on science and technology education in the Tennessee Valley.

Best wishes for all of your future endeavors.