

Don Bacon takes the heat as OPC's 188th Face

An evening of sharp humor and personal tributes highlight the relationships behind a career in public service

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U.S. Rep. Don Bacon's phone habits were fair game. So were his Facebook replies, his fondness for reporters and a last name that practically wrote the punchlines. But, as the Omaha Press Club honored Bacon as its 188th Face on the Barroom Floor on Oct. 15, the jokes repeatedly gave way to something more personal: stories of a colleague, commander and friend who made a lasting impression on the people around him.

The evening brought together political leaders, journalists, friends and family for a roast and toast celebrating the Nebraska congressman. With Bacon approaching the end of his congressional service, speakers reflected on his years in uniform and Washington, offering a portrait that extended well beyond his résumé.

Roger Humphries, chair of the Face on the Barroom Floor Committee, opened the program by thanking Bacon for being “tonight’s entertainment.” He also welcomed previous honorees, connecting the evening to the club’s long-standing tradition of recognizing community newsmakers through caricature and commentary.

Emcee Mary Barrett, Bacon’s friend and campaign finance director, quickly established that nobody would be entirely safe from the microphone. Her stories traced an unlikely political friendship. Barrett recalled first meeting Bacon while she was working for his Democratic opponent, the late Brad Ashford. Memories of competing parade appearances, a marching band and a pig in a wagon illustrated the spirited rivalry that preceded her eventual place on Bacon’s team.

Barrett described her eventual fundraising role as being his “little mafia girl.” She also recalled a post-fundraiser porch conversation about hopes and dreams, qualifying the story with an admission: “There was Jameson involved.” Her aspiration was to become a runway model; Bacon’s, she said, was to be Don Corleone. Her affectionate refrain, “Delicious Don,” became a running joke throughout the program.

Retired Air Force Col. Patrick Flood, Bacon’s former national security adviser and now a principal at Cornerstone Government Affairs in Washington, drew on nearly two decades of shared experience. First, however, he had to follow Barrett.

“I don’t know how I possibly follow that,” Flood said, before taking up her description of the honoree. “Delicious Don, are you joking me?”

Flood teased Bacon about everything from his fashion choices to his enthusiasm for interviews. He turned Bacon’s electronic warfare background into a congressional punchline, suggesting that experience jamming communications was ideal preparation for Washington.

He also re-cast Bacon’s military and political résumé as a lifelong effort to get people to listen to him and do what he wanted. “I don’t think it’s working,” Flood said.

Their shared assignments supplied further material. “Everywhere I went in the world for 10 years, there he was,” Flood joked. Later came another compliment with a catch: “Don, I want you to know you’re a great man. And I know that because you told me so.”

Then he set the jokes aside. “You have always led with courage, with integrity, with honor,” Flood told Bacon. He also recognized Bacon’s wife, Angie, describing her support as essential to the service and achievements being celebrated. That acknowledgment became a recurring theme as speakers recognized the demands public life places on families.

Former Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert, a KFAB radio host and Face No. 159, began with a familiar political greeting – she was delighted to support Bacon's reelection campaign.

Then came the correction - "Wrong speech."

Stothert built her remarks around a butcher-shop countdown, using meat-themed wordplay to recognize Bacon's courage, work ethic and ability to work with others. Beneath the jokes was her praise for his willingness to disagree, including with members of his own party.

U.S. Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., focused on another familiar subject – Bacon's direct line to practically everyone. She described a congressman who calls reporters himself, answers social media comments personally and sometimes leaves his communications staff discovering an interview along with the audience.

"Most members have some kind of communication strategy," Fischer said. "Don has a cell phone." Retirement, she predicted, would only give him more time to respond. She imagined Bacon spending his walks "airdropping unsolicited responses to anybody who just passes by."

Even her praise came with a punchline. "He's been a good colleague. Not the best, let's be honest," Fischer said. As she continued describing his legislative work, she interrupted herself – "Who wrote this?"

His recognizable thumbs-up gesture and seemingly endless supply of bacon puns also received attention. Fischer's remarks captured the evening's central rhythm – tease the habits, then acknowledge the person behind them.

Aaron Sanderford, managing editor for news at the Omaha World-Herald, brought a journalist's perspective to that accessibility. He joked about late-night messages and the unpredictability of covering Bacon, but his most affecting remarks concerned Bacon's relationship with Ashford.

The jokes also reached beyond the honoree. Recalling his reporting relationship with Stothert during her time as mayor, Sanderford said, "She was my last text at night and my first text in the morning."

Recalling conversations near the end of Ashford's life, Sanderford said the former congressman valued that Bacon saw him as a person first and a politician second. The observation gave the gathering a moment of reflection. In a room accustomed to campaigns, competing priorities and public disagreement, it offered a reminder of the relationships that can survive those divisions.

Bacon's Washington chief of staff, Mark Dreiling, supplied stories from the earliest days of the congressional campaign, including an aging campaign van and the challenges of managing a boss deeply attached to social media.

One staff prank involved a fabricated certificate recognizing Bacon's prolific Facebook use. According to Dreiling, Bacon displayed it in the Nebraska office before learning it was a joke.

Dreiling's closing story carried a different weight. When he was seriously ill and needed a liver transplant, he recalled Bacon asking whether he could donate part of his own liver. For Dreiling, the offer illustrated the character behind the public office.

The evening culminated in the unveiling of Bacon's caricature, with Humphries explaining its references to military service, legislative work, Offutt Air Force Base and Eppley Airfield. At its center stood Bacon at a podium bearing the message: "Everyone loves bacon."

Given his turn at the microphone, Bacon returned several jokes before offering thanks. He credited his family, staff, supporters and voters for the opportunities and accomplishments of
his career.

"Everything we do is a team win here," he said. His response also looked ahead. Bacon identified the national debt, immigration reform, health care costs and national security as issues requiring sustained cooperation. For the business community, his concerns about workforce needs and the cost of insurance offered a practical connection between the evening's reflections and the work still ahead.

He closed with gratitude for Angie, their family and the people who had supported him through military and congressional service. "This is a team sport," Bacon said.

By the end of the evening, the caricature had become a fitting companion to the stories told around it – a public figure rendered with humor, surrounded by the people and experiences that shaped his career.

Artist's description of the caricature of Rep. Don Bacon. the 188th Face on the Barroom Floor:

For nearly 40 years, Don Bacon has made the world a better place through his work in the military and the political arena.

The artist depicts Don at the podium with a microphone in his hand. The podium features the seal of the U.S. House of Representatives along with a not so subtle message – Everyone Loves Bacon.

The face caricature details Don's two careers – his military career which began in 1985 and spanned nearly 30 years and his political career which began in 2016 and spanned 10 years.

In his military career, Don reached the rank of brigadier general in the U.S. Air Force. To the left of the podium, you can see his military uniform hanging on a stand along with logos of the three colleges where he earned degrees – Northern Illinois University, the University of Phoenix and the Air War College – and a fourth college, Bellevue University, where Don taught as an assistant professor.

Below the podium, you can see the entrances to two of the Air Force bases where Don served – Ramstein Airbase in Germany and Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona. At the top left, you can see a plane flying overhead in recognition of Don's work as an Air Force pilot. Don served 16 assignments with four deployments to the Middle East, including one to Iraq from 2007 to 2008 during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Below the airplane, you can see the entrance to Offutt Air Force Base, where Don also served and first became a Nebraskan.

The right side of the drawing deals with Don's political career. Next to the podium, you see a stack of bills in Don's inbox. A prodigious legislator, Don was ranked No. 2 in the House in 2022 for having the highest number of bills signed into law.

A series of steps list some of Don's other accomplishments in the House:

- His service in the House Armed Services Committee;
- His work as chairman of the Military Quality of Life Panel;
- His being ranked the most effective Republican legislator in 2022; and
- His being ranked No. 8 among all House members in 2023 for his bipartisan efforts.

Finally, on the top right, you can see Eppley Airfield. Don was instrumental in bringing home the bacon – excuse the pun – and procuring more than $120 million in federal funding to help modernize Eppley as a regional transportation hub and make it more accessible for international flights.

At the base of the entrance to Offutt Air Force Base, another Bacon milestone is noted – the $1.6 billion in emergency federal funding he helped procure when Offutt and Camp Ashland were devasted by floods in 2019. The money was used to clean up, rebuild, and modernize both installations, which are critical to our national defense and Nebraska's economy.

So, there you have it, the artist's rendition of Don Bacon, our 188th Face on the Barroom Floor - a fitting tribute to the man who has shown us all what it means to be a great American.