

# PEER REVIEW

Ron Sweet

## Family

Married with four adult children from a previous marriage and nine grandchildren.

## Hobbies

Golf, racquetball, five-mile walks, exercising

## Favorite places to visit

Jamaica, the Riviera Maya area in Mexico and his children in Arizona

## Hobbies

Fishing, duck hunting and attending local high school basketball games

## Passing the torch

Sweet often speaks to classes at Marquette University, Cardinal Stritch University and the Milwaukee School of Engineering.

## Current project

Sweet plans to write a book, tentatively titled, "Shorts and a Nickel," about his mediation experiences. The title comes from a settlement he negotiated between ushers at Milwaukee County Stadium and their employer. The sticking points were a 5-cent raise and letting ushers wear shorts when the temperature reached 80 degrees.

# A lifetime of negotiations

*Sweet looks back at career in organized labor*



Sweet

Ron Sweet's 33-year career negotiating deals on behalf of organized labor as a Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service commissioner is impressive, considering he once avoided joining a union.

Sweet, who said he considers himself a problem solver, retired from the FMCS Jan. 3.

"I think my skills in life have always been to help people work together and to get them to solutions," he said. "Not one day of my job as a mediator did I ever consider [it] work."

Sweet, 62, said he may never have entered the profession had it not been for a summer job he took more than 40 years ago. During a summer break from classes at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Sweet worked in the industrial engineering department at Ladish Co. Inc. in Cudahy.

Sweet said he unwittingly joined the local branch of the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers.

"I went to the human resources department," he said, "and I said, 'I can't afford these union dues. I don't even want to join the union. I just want to work here for the summer.'"

Sweet said the local union president gave him two choices: pay his dues or find another job.

But Sweet said he found a third option.

He took a job as a shop steward in the industrial engineering department at Ladish, which didn't require him to pay dues, he said.

"I said, 'You just hired a steward,'" Sweet said.

Sweet said he felt conflicted at the end of the summer when it was time for him to resume studies at UW-La Crosse. He had planned to graduate and take a teaching job, he said, but he was enjoying his work with the IFPTE.

He eventually decided to stay and later was appointed to a bargaining committee to work

out an agreement between the union and Ladish.

In 1969, Sweet became an international representative for the union.

"At a very early age, I was considered a problem solver, not a problem maker," Sweet said. "Back then, everything was adversarial, and we found ways to solve things and to come up with solutions that were the best for both of us."

While working as an international representative, Sweet helped organize unions for engineers and scientists at Boeing in Seattle and at a NASA facility in Huntsville, Ala.

In 1970, he was appointed director of collective bargaining and legislation for the national organization of IFPTE in Washington, D.C.

"That was a big adjustment," Sweet said of moving his family there. "It was very cool, but it was challenging."

His work with the IFPTE gained the attention of a FMCS mediator, who ultimately recommended Sweet for a commissioner position.

Although he said he enjoyed his position with IFPTE, Sweet was intrigued by this new offer and eventually accepted a position in the FMCS field office in Milwaukee.

"I had had enough of Washington, D.C. and Potomac fever," he said.

Sweet said the crowning moment of his career occurred in 1997 when he negotiated an agreement between United Parcel Service and 250,000 striking members of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

Sweet said he treated the situation as if it were simply another negotiation.

"I harassed the living hell out of them," he said. "I was determined."

Sweet also said he advised President Bill Clinton on the strike, which was settled after 15 days, thanks in part to Sweet's efforts.

He might be retired, but Sweet said he's not done with the labor/management relations field.

"I'm looking at retirement as a breath of fresh air," he said, "and then I'll decide what I want to do with the rest of my life."

— Jim Livesey