Robert Pavlak, 70, dies; U.S. marshal and St. Paul officer

By David Chanen
Staff Writer

The consummate gentleman. The most honest man around. We need more people like him in this world. These sentiments were expressed repeatedly by colleagues in describing Robert Pavlak, a former U.S. marshal, St. Paul police officer and state legislator who died of cancer Sunday at his home in West St. Paul. He was 70.

Friends said Pavlak never lost his "common man" approach to people and their problems. Some said it was because he lived his life according to an unwritten code of ethics from which he never strayed. Others say it was Pavlak's desire to repay the community that cared for him when he was orphaned at a young age.

Robert Pavlak as a legislator in the Minnesota House in 1979.

Robert Pavlak Jr., of Maplewood, who works for the Ramsey County Sheriff's Department, said he and his brother, David, a St. Paul police officer, were inspired by their father's good direction. "A lot of people took stock in my father, and he offered people in need the fatherly attention he gave his own children," said Robert Jr.

Pavlak Sr. was hired by the St. Paul Police Department shortly after he returned from serving in the Marine Corps during World War II, and worked the downtown traffic beat for many years.
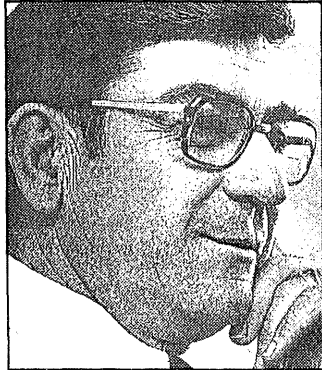
He became an excellent administrator who could plow through red tape to get a job done. During his 32 years in the department, he worked in public relations, directed community programs, trained volunteer officers and led one of the department's first attempts at community policing in the early 1970s.

Pavlak retired as a lieutenant and commander in 1981, when he was appointed U.S. marshal for the Minnesota District. He help set up a federal program that allows the government to seize and sell property confiscated during drug arrests. He retired in 1990.

Pavlak, a Republican, served in the Minnesota House from 1966 to 1974. He served with former St. Paul Police Chief William McCutcheon and Tony Bennett, also a former U.S marshal for Minnesota. At the time, all three were St. Paul police officers who were urged by the department to enter the Legislature to promote tougher crime laws.

Pavlak lost to DFLer Arnold Kempe in 1974 and challenged him again in 1979. During his campaign, Pavlak attacked his opponent for his poor attendance record. Pavlak compiled statistics showing that Kempe had missed 329 of 1,798 roll call votes.

He supplied the statistics, which were accurate, to the St. Paul Pioneer Press, and the paper endorsed him. But in the endorsement editorial, the newspaper printed the wrong numbers, which made Kempe's attendance record appear worse than it was. The Pavlak campaign reproduced and distributed copies of the editorial.

Pavlak won by 321 votes, but the House decided his violation of the state campaign practices law was severe enough to nullify his election, and he was ejected from the House. The Minnesota Supreme Court voted 7-2 that Pavlak's misdeed constituted a "deliberate, serious and material" violation of the state campaign law.

After his retirement, Pavlak continued his community service at St. Matthew's Catholic Church in St. Paul. He and his wife, Edel Ruth, helped raise almost $750,000 for the church.

Pavlak was born in St. Paul and raised in Milaca, Minn. His father, Leo, was a South St. Paul police officer who was killed during a bank robbery by Ma Barker's gang. His mother also died when he was young.

"I think there was always a little orphan boy inside him throughout his life," said Adrian.

In addition to his wife and two sons, Pavlak is survived by three daughters; Catherine Garvey, and Mary and Susan Pavlak, all of St. Paul, and a sister, Eleanor Hover, of Eagan.

Visitation will be from 3 to 9 p.m. today at St. Matthew's Catholic Church, 490 Hall Av. Services will be held at the church at noon Wednesday. Memorials to the church's capital fund are suggested. Arrangements are by the West Funeral Home, West St. Paul.