9 roasters ‘run’ Ashford through full court press

By Tom O’Connor
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Running is important to Brad Ashford – whether it’s navigating the streets of downtown Omaha during a lunch hour jog or tossing his hat into the ring for public office. It’s what he does.

But, it was hardly a walk in the park for the native Omahan, as he was trampled on by a slew of nine roasters on his way to becoming the Omaha Press Club’s 153rd Face on the Barroom Floor.
The May 17 roast was attended by more than a dozen elected officials, nine past Faces, and more than 100 others who came to pay their respects to the man who has been a political icon and community leader in Nebraska for more than 30 years.

The night began with a stirring invocation from Frank Barrett, a Face honoree in 1999. Emcee Jim Quinley then proceeded to talk about the perils of running with Ashford.

A pharmacist at Kubat Pharmacy, Quinley has been a running partner of Ashford for 22 years. He recounted how once a “gaggle of pro-lifers” were chasing after Ashford and Quinley. They had to hide in a Planned Parenthood office.

To make sure people would know who was who, Quinley created two T-shirts – one read, “I’m Brad Ashford” and had a target on the back; the other read, “I’m not” and had an arrow pointing to the target.

Quinley noted that during Ashford’s two-year stint in Congress he was asked to fly on Air Force One with President Obama. The untold part of the story, Quinley said, “He had to take the bus back.”

Ashford’s flip-flopping with political parties was an ongoing theme of the roast. His son, John, who is a public defender in Douglas County, said, “He’s been in more parties than Kanye (West) after the Emmys.”

He added if an Omaha street is ever named after his father, it would be the Northwest Radial Highway because it zig-zags so much that “nobody knows what the hell direction you’re going.”

Ashford’s wife, Ann, focused on the romantic side of her husband of 24 years, noting that it “revolves around the legislative process.” She told about a birthday card from Brad that read, “Happy birthday buddy.” It was signed, “Brad Ashford.”

On their 20th anniversary at Fleming’s, Ann presented Brad with a three-page love letter before dinner, where they were joined by Hal and Mary Daub. In the course of the dinner, Brad shared the love letter with the Daubs. “You can’t make this stuff up,” Ann said.

One of Ashford’s colleagues in the legislature, Chris Abboud, said, “To a lot of people, it seems like he doesn’t know what he’s doing. He’s kind of cosmic in his thinking, but he thinks outside the box.”

Woody Bradford, a Face honoree in 2016 and a fellow lawyer with Ashford, recalled Brad’s time as a law clerk in his office. “Brad would run and never come back,” Bradford said. “The question was always, ‘Where is Brad?’”

Bradford said Ashford had a bad habit of leaving the car door open, only to come back to the car and find the door gone. The classic Ashford-ism was when he left the car running, locked it, and it ran out of gas.
“If it wasn’t awkward, it wouldn’t be Brad,” said Chris Burbach, a reporter for the Omaha World-Herald and one of Ashford’s running partners. After more than 25 years of running, Burbach said Ashford might have logged “up to three miles by now.”

Erin Grace, a World-Herald columnist, told how Ashford couldn’t make up his mind on having her as a roaster. Going through her text message exchange with Ashford. First, she was in, then he texted her, “I got someone else (frown emoji).” Then, next text, “U think u can do it?”

“Brad’s philosophy is if you’re not part of the solution, just run for office,” said Jim Rose, radio personality on KFAB-AM. “Brad really doesn’t have enemies, but his friends don’t really like him that much.”

Rose added, “Brad holds a record at Happy Hollow for the most times hitting another guy’s golf ball and for talking in someone’s back swing.”

Ashford, who recently stepped down as executive director of Midtown 2050, received encouragement from Rex Fisher, director of corporate relations at HDR, Inc., who said, “We’re all confident you’ll find another job.” Fisher fondly remembered an Ashford interview on Meet the Press in which Brad “finished the interview arguing with himself.”

Congratulatory letters were received from two prominent Democrats – Nancy Pelosi of California, the House of Representatives minority leader, and Steny Hoyer, a Congressman from Maryland.

Ashford personally acknowledged each of the political colleagues who turned out for the roast and recognized the press by saying, “They made me who I am today.”

He expressed his pride in being bi-partisan – “That’s how we do things in Nebraska” – and how excited he was that the Omaha VA will soon have a new state-of-the-art medical center – “We owe our 20 million veterans our tremendous thanks.”

He concluded by saying, “It’s been a great journey.”

**Artist Jim Horan’s description of Ashford’s Face on the Barroom Floor**

“Brad is dressed for running a race – either a political race or a marathon. He’s wearing a suit coat, a striped tie, shorts and red running shoes – one of which seems to have come untied.

“The suit has a label on it – the Nebraska Clothing Company – the Ashfords’ family business. His wife, Ann, is timing his run using a large stopwatch and for longer races an hour glass. Ex-President Barack Obama is cheering Brad on.

“In the background is the Nebraska State Capitol building. The sower has been replaced by a statue of a runner. There’s a very large stack of papers representing the Veterans Act, HR 5099, and a large photo of the Omaha VA Medical Center – two of Brad’s biggest accomplishments as a Congressman.”