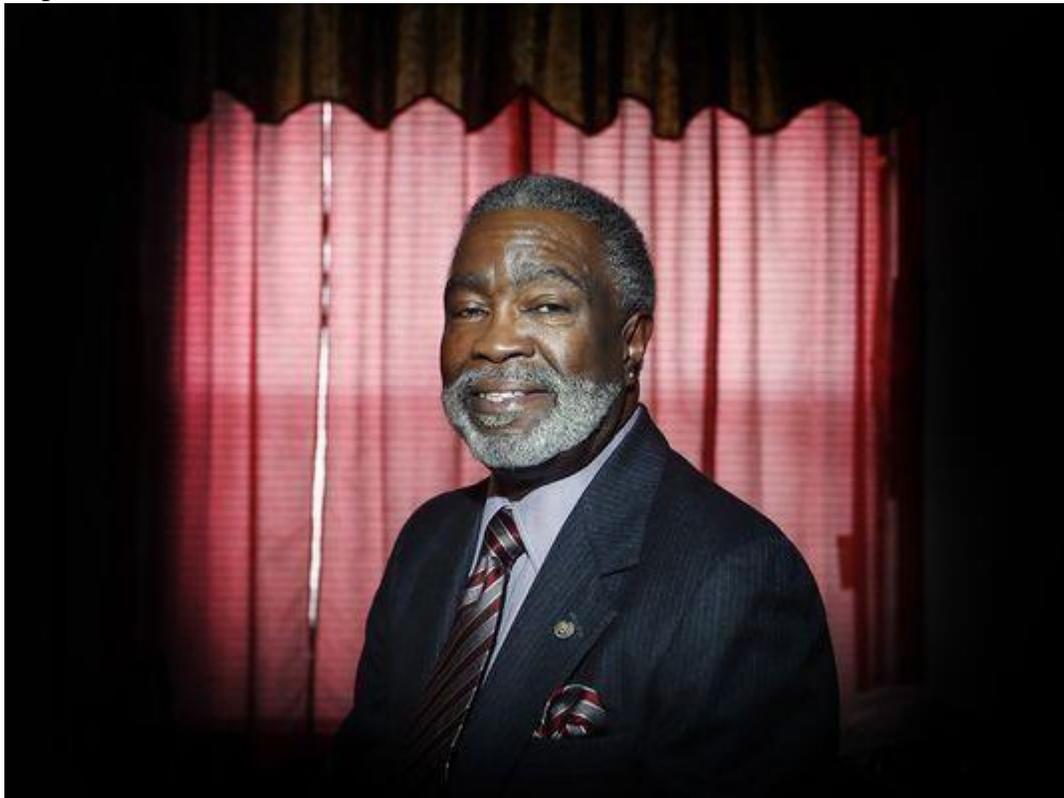


## Memphis Council honors lifesaving City Hall guard Peter McNeal

[Ryan Poe](#), USA TODAY NETWORK – Tennessee Published 12:01 p.m. CT Dec. 19, 2017 | Updated 3:53 p.m. CT Dec. 19, 2017



Peter McNeal, a security guard at City Hall, was off duty just before Thanksgiving when he saved a choking man's life in the Piccadilly on Poplar. He performed the Heimlich "for what seemed like hours." McNeal is being honored Tuesday with a resolution from the City Council.(Photo: Mark Weber / The Commercial Appeal)Buy Photo

Two days before Thanksgiving, Peter McNeal — a 67-year-old, off-duty Memphis City Hall security guard — was eating a slice of custard pie in the Piccadilly restaurant on Poplar when a man behind him began choking on a piece of rare prime rib.

McNeal, a native of South Memphis, had never used the Heimlich maneuver outside of his Memphis International Airport Police Department training in the late 1970s, but witnesses described him as calmly walking over to the dying man, wrapping his arms around him and squeezing for minutes that seemed longer than hours to the large, anxious crowd of onlookers and the man's frightened wife.

The pre-Thanksgiving "miracle" was so miraculous, word got to Memphis City Council member Patrice Robinson, who will present McNeal with a resolution honoring his lifesaving service during Tuesday's council meeting.

McNeal's path to that moment began in the early 1970s when he was drafted into the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War and joined the Military Police Corps. At the time, McNeal — whose life began in 1949 at the now-demolished Jane Terrell Baptist Hospital in Midtown Memphis — was studying music education (he's proficient at the melodica) at Kentucky State University, home of the Thorobreds, following his graduation from George Washington Carver High School.

In 1973, following a posting in Germany, McNeal faced the question of that age: What to do now? He decided to stick with law enforcement, joining the criminal justice program at thenMemphis State University. Before joining FedEx as a security guard and then working 15 years at City Hall, McNeal was an airport police officer from 1977 to 1987 — and that's when he learned the Heimlich that he used at about 2:15 p.m. Nov. 21.

At the time, he was treating Memphis Police video analyst Judy McEwen-Bunkley — a 65-year-old resident of Shelby County and his friend of 43 years — to lunch. She wanted to nail down what he would bring to the Thanksgiving meal she organized every year at the Shelby County Juvenile Detention Center. (He brought to-go plates.)

“When we arrived to eat, it was the right place at the right time.”

Judy McEwen-Bunkley, friend and witness

McEwen-Bunkley described her friend as "weird" — but in the best way. "Weird" in the sense that he stayed beside her dying husband, also his friend, until the very end; that he had been an active member in St. John Baptist in Downtown since he was 10 years old, directing the mass

choir and singing and ushering and counseling and reading to young kids as part of the Real Men Read program. "Weird" in that he quietly gets things done.

"He's just different," she said. "He didn't run to the gentleman. He just kind of got up from his pie and sauntered over to the man who was choking. He never gave up."

She added: "When we arrived to eat, it was the right place at the right time."

St. John pastor Henry Key describes McNeal as "gifted" at making people feel "warm and welcome" — but not in a "mushy way."

"I say this without any qualification," said Key, who has overseen his flock since 2013. "He respects people from one to another. If he had aught against you, you would never know it."

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Henry Key, pastor of St. John Baptist Church

As McNeal performed the Heimlich, McEwen-Bunkley said it struck her that her friend, an African-American, didn't care about the color of the white man's skin, whether he was Republican or Democrat, whether he loved dogs or cats, or what his football team was (McNeal says he passionately hates the Cowboys).

"None of that mattered to him," she said. "It helped people see the good in people. There really isn't enough of that. You wish it was more."

After what seemed like hours to McNeal, his training from nearly 40 years before paid off. To the surprise of the onlookers — and McNeal — the rare meat surfaced.

What happened next was the "weirdest thing," McNeal said. One man approached McNeal and said he'd been inspired to look for ways to serve others. "Everyone in the restaurant was standing there. It was a sea of faces. They started thanking me and shaking my hand, patting me on the back and telling me what a miraculous thing it was."

The man and his wife paid McNeal's tab, thanked him again and left, said McNeal, who didn't catch their names. A Piccadilly manager confirmed the events but referred further questions to the chain's communications officer, who didn't return calls.

McNeal, unassuming as usual, didn't ask for the honors or thanks from the council or at the restaurant, McEwen-Bunkley said. After he calmly finished saving the man's life, he just as calmly returned to his seat, sat down and finished his custard pie.