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A man of education, humor & mystery

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John Carlin grew up near Salina. He's a Democrat. And he lives in Manhattan. Those three things are true of Rep. Sydney Carlin's husband, John E. Carlin, and former Kansas governor John W. Carlin. But beyond that, the two are very different in appearance and substance.

John William Carlin is 65. He grew up in Saline County, graduated from Kansas State University and took over the family dairy farm until becoming politically active in the 1970s. He made his way from the House of Representatives to the governorship in 1979, serving until 1987. He was then the national archivist in Washington, D.C., for a decade until taking a position in K-State's political science department.

John Edward Carlin, who is 69, went to Notre Dame and then on to seminary. He was a priest for a number of years, until he met his wife Sydney here in Manhattan. Since then, he's done some consulting, helped found Kansas' first dental HMO in the late 1980s, and retired in 1996. He also went to K-State and was assistant director of continuing education for some time. Today, he lectures on topics such as ethics.

The two men grew up within 3 miles of one another, but didn't go to the same school. Ever since the former governor moved to Manhattan last fall, the opportunity for confusion has grown — possibly even more so for John Edward.

John E., who has been jokingly referred to as "Sydney's wife," said he's had to change more than a few of their business accounts — like the one at the dry cleaners — to Sydney's name. They often hand-deliver the mail they get by mistake.

"There's no money in it ... I looked real close," John E. jokes.

But although John E. has long been mistaken for the former governor, it hasn't happened so much the other way around.

"I've been introduced as George Carlin," John W. says.

John E. tells a tale of once visiting the Basehor-Linwood School District as an educational consultant — and then being asked to "talk to a few students." He was taken over to a gym — which was lined with students.

"Uh oh," he recalls thinking.

But it gets better.

He broke his glasses the night before, wrestling with one of his kids, and at the time he was driving a 1973 Volkswagen Bug — the paint on which, he asserts, was less than shiny.

"Here I am with my glasses half off in my beat up old VW bug," he recalls. He came up with some sort of witty comment — the substance of which was sports-related and inspirational. Then a teacher asked him for his autograph.

He gave her one and made a hasty retreat.

More recently, John E. was thanked at a dinner by the recipient of a scholarship John W. was giving out.

"The girl said, 'I just want to thank you so much,'" he said. By the time the dinner was over, it was late. He didn't say anything because "life's too short."

Sydney Carlin says she's asked frequently whether she's married to the former governor.

"People who know politics very well are hesitant at first," she said. "They try to figure it out and you can just see the wheels turning. People ask me all the time if I'm related to the former governor... and I'm sure they mean married to him."

Both Carlin families originally came from Ireland, at different times and from different sections of the country. Although it's possible, John E. and John W. don't think they're related.

And they aren't the only John Carlins around. Each has a son, but the sons use their middle names, David and Michael, to avoid confusion.

"We've got to get an act or something," said John E. on a recent afternoon.

"Yeah, we've got to find some way to make some money on this," John W. said.

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