

local news

Undue process?

Allegations and hearsay have damaged the career and reputation of the nation's highest-placed gay cop, Portland's Commander Mike Garvey

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by Inga Sorensen

In many ways, writing this story is like writing an obituary. In this case, however, the figure at the center, Mike Garvey, has been silenced not by death, but by his diligent esquire.

The thought of approaching the relatives creates a sense of unease, as nosy reporters intrusively inquire: "What was he like as a kid?" "How is the family taking it?" during what is clearly a turbulent emotional moment in a family's life.

And the parallels don't end there. Some of those making the most damaging allusions elect to remain in the shadows, at least for now, serving up a variety of rationales. On the other end, allies trumpet tales that depict the subject in almost superhuman proportions.

As you probably know by now, Garvey, 42, is the Portland Police Bureau official who is under investigation for possibly hiring male prostitutes via an area escort service.

Garvey, a 20-year police veteran and lifelong Oregonian, was recently placed on administrative leave and removed from his post as commander of Central Precinct, the Portland Police Bureau's largest precinct. He has handed over his badge and his gun.

Police investigators will not comment on the scope of their examination, which has reportedly taken them to Washington state and California, but KOIN-TV recently aired a report featuring an anonymous figure who charged that some years ago Garvey pulled him over for drunken driving. The man says Garvey failed to give him a ticket, but did show up on his doorstep a few hours later to demand oral sex.

Garvey is gay, a fact that—contrary to mainstream media accounts—was not widely known in the sexual minorities community. An *Oregonian* article went so far as to claim that Garvey "pioneered gay rights."

Within the past couple of years Garvey has mentioned his sexual orientation during meetings with the Sexual Minorities Roundtable, a citizens advisory group.

"He made mention of it at least on one occasion a bit over a year ago," says William Warren, who represents the Sexual Minorities Roundtable to the Chief's Forum. "We were talking about the community's view of the police. At one point he said something like, 'I can understand [those views] as a cop and a gay man.' No one said, 'Hey, did you say what I think you just said?' but that was the feeling."

Warren recalls a previous instance a couple of years ago when the hunky gay couple Bob and Rod Jackson-Paris stopped in Portland to promote sales of their book, *Straight from the Heart: A Love Story*.

"I had made mention of the fact that Bob and Rod Jackson-Paris were coming to town [for a book signing], and Mike said he was interested in seeing them," recalls Warren.

"He wondered whether he should go in [civilian clothes] or in uniform," he says, adding that Garvey opted for the latter. "At that point we did not discuss his being gay directly, we talked around it."

This past March during an event cosponsored by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, a media watchdog organization, Garvey publicly stated he was a gay man. GLAAD was hosting a gala for "The Long Road to Freedom," a traveling exhibit detailing lesbian and gay history.

"Mike was there to talk about bias crimes," explains Donna Red Wing, a Portland resident and GLAAD's national field director. "At one point he said: 'This will probably be more relevant to you if you know this—I'm a gay man.' I knew he was gay, but I don't think a lot of people in the room did. It probably stunned some folks."

Red Wing says she first met Garvey in 1991 when she was a member of a budgetary advisory committee.

"But my gaydar didn't start to buzz until early

1992," says the lesbian activist, who was part of a group of sexual minority citizens who met regularly with police to discuss issues of particular concern to the queer community.

"Previously he had said things like 'the gay community' but one day he said 'our community,' and we looked at each other in that covert way. That was the first real connection," says Red Wing, adding that she subsequently had more open dialogue with Garvey about "the gay thing."

"We talked about very personal things, and I think we connected on some profound levels," she says. "I'm not going to judge Mike."

Just Out has been courting Mike Garvey for a couple of years. We've repeatedly requested that he appear—as a cover feature—in our publication. We also requested an interview with Garvey via his attorney, Stephen A. Houze, for this story.

A little more than a year ago, I sat for a couple of hours in Garvey's office at Central Precinct where we talked about the difficulties of being an out gay cop.

Garvey expressed reservations about a cover story because of the torrent of media attention that would likely follow. He told us he would be the highest-ranking openly gay police official in the country and feared he would wind up on *60 Minutes* before he was ready. He also said he was working on a business venture and didn't want that plan placed in jeopardy. Every few months we would make another request, to no avail.

Being an openly gay, lesbian, bisexual or transsexual cop has got to be tough. After all, the law enforcement field largely remains a militaristic world soaked in machismo.

Some queer officers say they have been left without backup in potentially life-threatening situations because other cops knew or assumed they were gay. Others report being the target of harassment by other officers. Some simply get the cold shoulder, which still is a painful snub given the clubby sentiment among many cops.

Marc Goodman is an openly gay sergeant with the Los Angeles Police Department and is co-founder of Law Enforcement Gays and Lesbians International, an organization of sexual minority law and justice personnel.

"Many states still have sodomy statutes on the books. If you're gay, it's assumed you're engaging in sodomy, and therefore breaking the law. If you're a gay cop in this situation, you may be more inclined to stay in the closet," says Goodman, who frequently speaks with gay and lesbian officers about their concerns. "Gay cops also fear not being one of the boys and not getting backup."

Katie Potter is the daughter of former Portland



Mike Garvey

Police Chief Tom Potter, who retired in 1993. She has been with the Portland Police Bureau for 11 years, serving the past seven-and-a-half years as an officer.

She came out publicly as a lesbian in a *Just Out* cover story in the early 1990s, which in turn prompted an onslaught of mainstream media attention. Her father, who was the city's top cop at the time, was also featured as a loving and supportive parent.

Katie Potter, 31, concedes that the presence of out sexual minority officers may make some colleagues uncomfortable. She says soon after going public, the bureau received calls from reporters who asked: "Did Potter shoot at her girlfriend at a party in Beaverton?"

"They said they heard that from sources within the Portland Police Bureau," says Potter. "It was absurd, but there are a lot of officers who have a problem with the sexual minorities community."

Potter also says that upon her father's retirement announcement, a reporter approached the chief and asked him how his health was.

"He was perfectly fine, so it seemed like a weird question," says daughter Katie. "My father later learned that someone within the bureau had said that he had AIDS and that's why he was retiring. The source also questioned my father's sexuality."

According to Sgt. Michele Lish of Portland's Northeast Precinct, an organization called Vision was established in 1993 for sexual minorities working in the fields of law and justice.

The statewide group acts as a support network for sexual minorities and is dedicated to creating a positive work environment. Members may include, among others, police officers, prosecutors, criminal justice support personnel, and parole and probation officers.

Confidentiality is ensured, though some members, among them Katie Potter, are fully out of the closet.

"I think we all collectively feel more of a burden," says Potter, alluding to the recent Garvey brouhaha. The sentiment is also echoed by Lish, Red Wing and other members of the sexual minority community.

"When you're a part of an ethnic or sexual minority group and something negative happens, it reflects on the entire group," says Potter. "It's also unfortunate that some officers who may have been considering coming out will instead say, 'No way, it's too risky.'"

Talk about your relationship," I ask Charlie Makinney, now the assistant city manager for the city of West Hollywood, Calif.

Makinney met Garvey 20-odd years ago when Garvey was applying to become a Portland police

officer and Makinney, who is openly gay, was involved in administering the exam.

Off the bat, Makinney responds robustly: "Are you asking me if we were lovers? No we were not, but we are close friends."

Friends, says Makinney, who vacationed together over the years, traveling to destinations such as Palm Springs. "And no," he volunteers, "I never saw him hire a prostitute—ever."

Makinney, who previously served as the Portland Police Bureau's director of management services, adds: "Mike is the consummate cop. His job means everything to him."

He also says that he worried for Garvey's well-being when his friend started going more public.

"I was in Portland about a month ago, and Mike was just so open about being gay. I told him that I thought he was kind of throwing it in people's faces. He said he didn't think he was," says Makinney. "I believe Mike is viewed as a threat by some people in the Portland Police Bureau. He is so openly gay and it offends people within the organization."

Makinney also believes the allegations against Garvey "are too convenient, too coincidental."

That hypothesis has been sounded by other supporters. Rumors are circulating that someone angry over Garvey's involvement in the City of Portland's ongoing attempt to shut down The City Nightclub, a Portland hot spot catering to sexual minority youth that police say is saturated with illicit drug and predatory activities, has played a role in this saga.

"I have heard that rumor," says club owner Lanny Swerdlow. "All I know is that this whole thing seems to be getting weirder and weirder."

City Nightclub patrons have indeed voiced resentment toward Garvey for what they view as an unwarranted crusade to close Swerdlow's establishment.

When I spoke with queer youth for *Just Out's* June 7 cover story about the club controversy, I was told by two sources that Garvey contacted them and requested assistance in "getting dirt" on The City in order to close it down.

One source, a gay man in his early 20s who asked not to be identified for fear of police retaliation, says Garvey showed him a "three-ring binder full of information about The City."

"He said The City was an unhealthy place," says the source. "He also said he'd like to have the resources to open his own club for gay youth."

Goodman, who works in the LAPD's internal affairs division, says his police department "would not remove an officer from their post unless there was considerable evidence [of wrongdoing]."

"I couldn't say what the deal is up there in Portland," he says, "but for us to do something like that there would have to be pretty overwhelming evidence."

Potter, however, says she is aware of situations in which officers have been placed on administrative leave—also known as the "10-to-2 plan" because those placed on leave (including Garvey) must call in to the bureau daily at 10 am and 2 pm—and the allegations were "totally unsubstantiated and unfounded."

Neat rows of tank tops, caps and heavy-cotton sweatshirts in forest greens, deep maroons and faded grays line the shelves of Garvey's Crew House, a casual clothing store on Portland's trendy Northwest 23rd Avenue. An espresso bar sits in one corner. It is one of three such stores that Garvey owns in Portland and Arizona.

"So many people have come in, especially when this all first broke, to show their support for Mike," says the amiable store clerk. Tanned, lean, and pony-tailed, he looks like he enjoys a good wind surf every now and then. "We've had some reporters come in," he says with a grimace. "Those television reporters are the worst, the phony way they say, 'Have a great day.'"