

The Thin Queer Line

Sketches of three of Portland's finest

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PHOTOS BY LINDA KLIEWER



A contingent of cops in Portland's 1994 pride parade

It's a soggy Sunday afternoon in early November. After bidding my beloved farewell in front of the East Precinct building, situated in the eastern reaches of the city, I sign my life over (quite literally, on an official form) and climb into squad car number 904, driven this afternoon by officer Cheryl McGinley, a 23-year veteran of the Portland Police Bureau.

An avid fly-fisher, a hiker, camper, furniture refinisher and builder, McGinley has been with the bureau since the days when women weren't allowed to work Portland's rougher neighborhoods. These days the picture is slightly different. There is now a female motorcycle officer, and there was recently a woman finalist in the recruitment process for the bureau's SWAT team. And McGinley's patrol area includes stretches near the Portland International Air-

port, 82nd Avenue, and Northeast Prescott Street.

But enough about being a female cop. What about being a female cop who is a lesbian?

"Oh, just look at me," she says, and turns in her seat as her squad car glides north on a narrow road. She wears her brown hair close-cropped, and has soft blue eyes and an angular jaw line. "Can't you tell I'm a dyke?"

For McGinley, the coming out process was not necessarily hampered by the fact that she's a law enforcement officer.

"As your co-workers become your friends, things about your personal life come up," says McGinley, who once served as her precinct's representative during contract bargaining and pushed hard for—and won—domestic partner benefits.

She says her supervisors do more than pay lip service to the concepts of equal opportunity.

"There is a no-nonsense approach to harassment and discrimination," she says. "Which is not to say we don't have some bad cops. We do. But *The Oregonian* usually catches them quickly."

The conversation switches gears from sexual orientation to coffee in three seconds.

"I never know how the day's going to start," she says, and parks her car in front of a convenience store with a rusty ice chest out front. "Sometimes it's dead babies, sometimes it's sexual abuse, and sometimes it's just a cup of coffee," she says, and shuts the engine off. "I prefer coffee."

Throughout the afternoon, McGinley will veer off the topic of her sexual orientation over and over again—not because she's uncomfortable with it, but because more pressing issues keep coming up: lives run amok, drugs and assault, the fear of being shot and killed in the line of duty, the need to experience a profound and oftentimes detrimental connection with the human condition.

In a field with life and death so close to its core, perhaps the gender of those you love doesn't really matter.

The woman has scraggly blonde hair and is barefoot on this chilly afternoon. She lives in a camper in her mother's front yard.

"That guy sprays me with a hose every time I walk by there," she says, and holds up a drenched pair of sweat pants for McGinley's inspection.

She explains that they had a brief affair. "But nothing serious," she says. "Two or three times."

"Why do you walk by the house?" McGinley asks.

"To use the pay phone."

"You have to really like yourself in this business," she says, and sips her coffee as she radios

back to the dispatcher that she's on her way to investigate the man with the hose. "Otherwise you'll take your frustrations out in all the wrong ways."

For McGinley, who became an officer after completing two degrees in biology, the frustrations are defused in a number of ways: talking with friends and co-workers, refinishing furniture, swearing at the windshield of her squad car.

Not far away, in an alley, the man in question and a friend work on a motorcycle. McGinley gets out of the car, introduces herself and asks a few polite questions.

After a number of surly responses, the man attempts to enter the house. But McGinley, who stands 5 feet 5 inches tall, hustles him into the back seat of the squad car with a speed and efficiency that no camera could ever hope to capture.

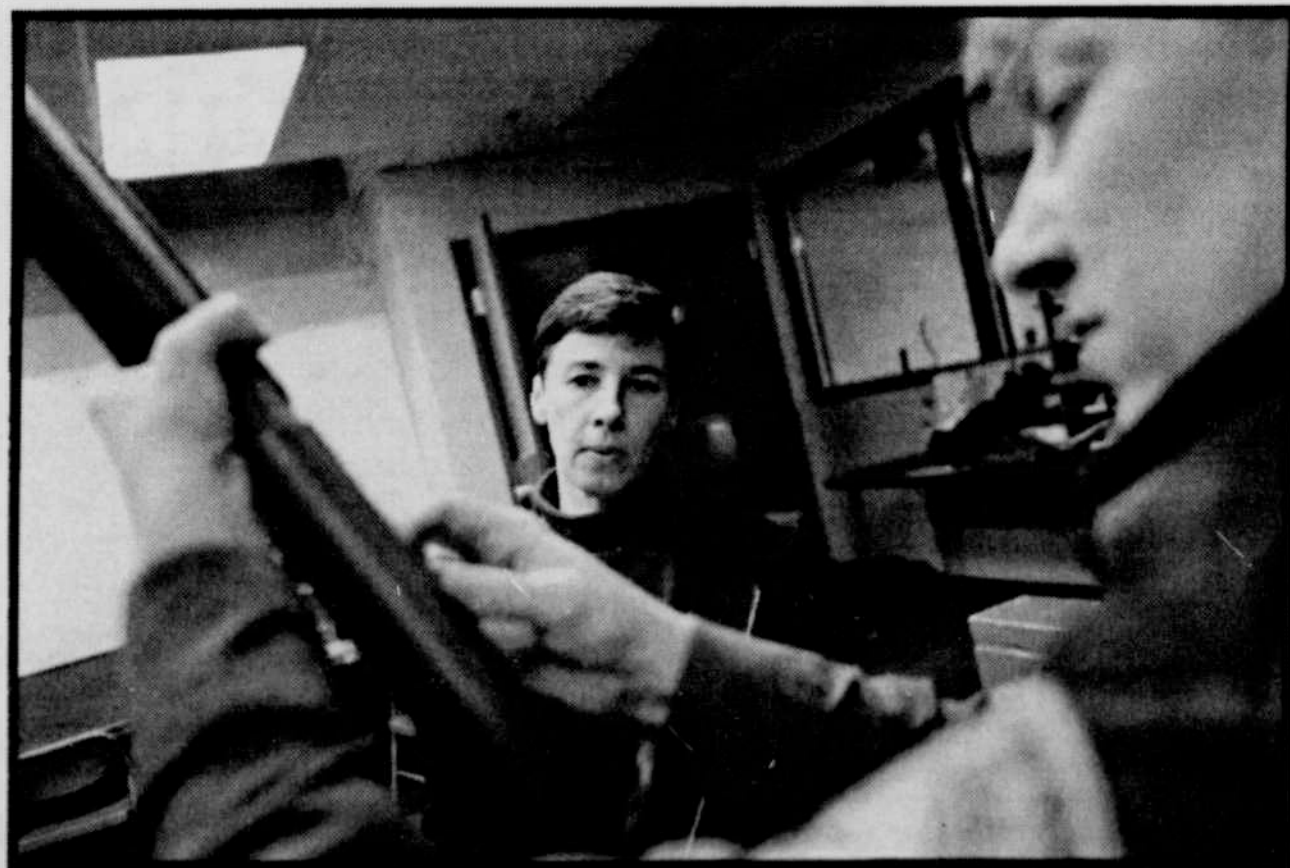
"Listen," she says later, after she's dropped the guy off at the Justice Center downtown, "I know better than to let someone disappear into a house. There's a good chance they'll run out another exit or come out with a weapon and blow me away."

Later, as the sun begins to dip beneath the western horizon and the clouds part to reveal a jagged skyscape, McGinley says she knew the two Portland police officers who were killed on the job in the last two years. "They were both friends of mine," she says softly.

The fear of being blown away.

When most of us think of job-related stress, we probably think of deadlines, difficult bosses, perhaps a hopelessly antiquated filing system. But what would drive someone to risk his or her life each and every time he or she clocks in?

"I've been asked that question many times, and I don't know that I have an answer," says officer Sara Westbrook, who's been a cop for 13



Cheryl McGinley (center) works with Tracy Bertalot before administering shooting range qualification tests

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