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northwest
Bias Crimes Explained
 Bias crime detectives team up to tackle this tough topic
 by Julie Sabatier

Although Portland is widely considered a safe city for sexual minorities, local crime statistics show that almost half of the 33 reported bias crimes in 2007 were based on sexual orientation or gender. "It's going to be the gays that are far more persecuted in these things," said former Portland bias crimes detective Brian Grose. "And the severity of the crimes against gay people are typically a lot worse."

Grose, who is 44 and straight, is part of Basic Rights Oregon's 50 Voices for Equality project. He says most of the reported crimes are assaults of some kind, ranging from verbal threats to physical violence, vandalism and theft.

In July, Grose passed the task of investigating these crimes to detective Michele Michaels, 41, who is a lesbian. Both were quick to point out that a detective's sexual orientation has little to do with how he or she does the job.

"For the most part, it's investigating a case as though it's a case," said Grose. "And they pick people for the bias crimes position based on their investigative skill and whether or not they 'get it' and whether or not they believe in it."

Michaels joined the Portland force six years ago after leaving a career in teaching that brought her to such varied locations as an English-language school in Guam, where she taught literature, and Clackamas Community College, where she taught writing and English. She said her experience as an ethnic minority in Guam might be one of the reasons she "gets it."

Part of what makes bias crimes work nuanced is figuring out what constitutes a bias crime. The main focus is on the intentions of the attacker, meaning if someone is attacked because someone else makes an assumption about his or her sexual orientation, it's a bias crime regardless of the victim's actual orientation.

State law considers an assault to be a bias crime if it is based on the victim's race, color, religion, national origin or sexual orientation. But the Portland Police Bureau's policy and procedure handbook has a much broader definition of bias, adding gender identity, marital status, political affiliation or beliefs, labor organizing, physical or mental handicap, economic or social status, age or citizenship.

Michaels explained that while bias crimes have to be prosecuted according to state law, the bureau's wider lens can be helpful when legislators look at expanding the statute. The Legislature held hearings in 2005 to address adding "gender identity" to the Oregon hate crimes statute. Grose testified at the hearing in favor of the change, but the proposal went nowhere in the Republican-controlled Legislature. When Senate Bill 2 goes into effect Jan. 1, 2008, genderqueer and transgender people will be protected under a new definition of "sexual orientation."

According to Grose and Michaels, Portlanders might see a rise in bias crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity in the coming months as politics heats up around domestic

partnership and nondiscrimination laws. "I'd be a little more diligent and a little more vigilant, but I don't really think it's going to be this witch hunt," said Grose.

He stressed the importance of reporting a crime, even if you suspect the police might not be able to follow up. "This person who does this is going to get bolder and bolder, and [you] may be saving someone from being actually killed someday," he explained.

Michaels and Grose emphasized that although alcohol often plays a factor in bias crimes, it should not prevent a victim from reporting an attack. "We need them to call in and tell us those things are happening, and just because you're drunk doesn't mean somebody has the right to come and do something," said Michaels.



Detective Michele Michaels encourages readers to report hate crimes to the Portland Police Bureau.

As real estate on Southwest Stark Street and Old Town shifts and bars catering to straight and gay clientele move closer in proximity, the crowd pouring out onto the streets at closing time is more mixed. Grose predicts this could lead to a rise in alcohol-related bias crimes.

"I don't see it skyrocketing, but it could definitely go up," he said. "Anytime you mix those two crowds, it's just a matter of time."

Michaels is aware of the many factors that could increase bias crimes in the sexual minorities community. She says she is excited to take on the responsibilities of her new role and hopes she can make a difference.

"The more we do, the more it becomes a part of our social structure that it's not OK," she said. "And the more that we get across that it's not OK, the better off we all are." 10

The OFFICE OF NEIGHBORHOOD INVOLVEMENT and the PORTLAND POLICE BUREAU offer a free personal safety training for sexual minorities 7 p.m. Oct. 9 at Q Center, 69 S.E. Taylor St.