

# Friends on the force are the hardest to leave behind

"I'm with Portland Copwatch. Why are you harassing this man?"  
I looked up in disbelief from Mr. Jarmer, an elderly, homeless regular of SE Hawthorne whom I'd gotten to know during my summer patrolling the area on a bicycle. A former college teacher, malt liquor was guiding his life now. He usually sported a



**STREET  
BLUES**  
Robert Pickett

Robert Pickett has been a Portland Police Officer for eight years. He has spent most of that time working in inner Southeast Portland, first as a patrol officer, and more recently as a Neighborhood Response Team officer working on neighborhood livability issues.

lucid, good-humored buzz, but today my partner and I discovered him lying on the sidewalk, highly inebriated and unable to walk because of some sort of leg injury. I was trying to decipher his slurred account of his leg problem when the twenty-something man interrupted me with his demanding tone.

It made me angry. Not only was the young man interrupting my work, but he'd made a judgment that something was awry based on nothing more than the scene of a police officer bending over a man lying on the sidewalk. If he'd quietly watched for ten seconds, he would have quickly realized that I knew Mr. Jarmer by name and was trying to figure out how to best help him. In fact, it was hard to imagine what he could have possibly found lacking in the service we were providing.

My partner and I knew most of the regulars of the neighborhood because we had been out on bicycles much of the summer, building relationships with all of them. It enabled us to provide nuanced police service tailored to specific problems and people in the neighborhood. This was some of the most intimate policing that modern, efficiency-driven (and therefore patrol car-driving) Portland had to offer, harkening back to the foot-beat officer of the 1950s. I've heard countless older Portlanders speak wistfully of those officers and the personal relationships they had with them. Furthermore, it was a service initiated by a few interested officers in Southeast Precinct—we'd convinced then-Commander Rosie Sizer to let us ride bikes in this relatively small area, improving

service here but taking manpower away from the precinct's wider 911 response ability.

Of course this is a long, complicated story that the man from Copwatch knew nothing about. He made his judgment based on preconceptions mixed with a brief, initial observation. In this practice he is not alone, particularly in our world of instant media searching incessantly for items to fill the 24-hour news cycle. It wasn't until becoming an officer that I could begin to compare news accounts with personal experience and see that they often differ dramatically.

Media outlets are always on the lookout for dramatic or controversial stories for their emotional pull on readers, but they don't have a lot of space to explain or time to research because of the pressure to be the first to report a story. Police events often fit the drama and controversy requirements, but it can take time for investigators to figure out what really happened, and police are often loath to quickly release information they have compiled for fear of jeopardizing ongoing investigations. A result of this tension can be promptly produced, but incomplete or inaccurate news stories.

I now watch and read the news with an overhanging question, regardless of topic—is there more to this story?

I write this from Washington D.C., where I just finished my first day at my new job as a Foreign Service Officer with the United States Department of State. After a few months of training, my family and I will be sent to the first of many yet-to-be-decided countries, where I will work as a diplomat in U.S. embassies and consulates. This opportunity came suddenly, and only a job of such potential service, growth, travel and education, for me and my family, could tear us away from Portland, our friends and the Police Bureau.

While I look forward to learning more to the story at the national and international level, I already miss the best part of being a Portland officer — my co-workers. These men and women in uniform and their support staff tend to over 400,000 calls for service every year, many involving high-

stress, swiftly evolving situations. We ask them to be mental-health workers, parents, law scholars, mediators, chemists, ministers, social workers, diplomats, protectors and sometimes warriors. We ask them to be tough and compassionate, balance the interests of victims and suspects, evaluate risk to themselves and to the community, and navigate criminal law and constitutional rights. Occasionally we expect them to make these judgments in a matter of seconds, and then accept as a matter of course the lengthy, intense scrutiny of courts, co-workers, media and citizenry that follows.

Of course, being human, our police are fallible, and imperfections are always spotlighted. What can get lost if we focus solely on critical stories, however, is the big picture: while not perfect, Portland police officers are — in general — very, very good. They routinely do patient, thoughtful, dangerous and occasionally heroic work. Such daily habits rarely make the news.

During my final roll call as an officer last Wednesday, we debriefed an incident from the previous day where a suicidal man was threatening to jump from the Vista Bridge. After speaking at length with the potential jumper, one of the officers was able to inch close enough to grapple the ill man to the bridge deck, where he was handcuffed and safely sent to the hospital via ambulance.

The supervisors of the shift were confronted with a challenging leadership problem—how to commend and respect the officer's probable life-saving actions, while generally discouraging such actions in the future because of the grave risk of a suicidal person pulling an officer over the railing. One-by-one the sergeant, lieutenant, captain and commander each did their best to delicately communicate their concern for their officers' safety.

Left unspoken, however, was the reality that risking themselves for others is what officers show up to do every day. Asking an officer to refrain from such an act is like giving a lollipop to a child and asking her not to lick. I am tremendously honored and thankful for the opportunity work among such people. The citizens of Portland can be proud of them.

Street Roots has enjoyed working with Robert in bringing you this column. While Robert is moving on, the beat will continue with a new writer from the Portland Police Bureau this summer.

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**KATHLEEN RYAN**  
Photographer, Author

**ISRAEL BAYER**  
Executive Director, Street Roots

**SUENN HO**  
Urban Designer, Artist

**JULIE McCURDY**  
Housing Organizer, Sisters Of The Road

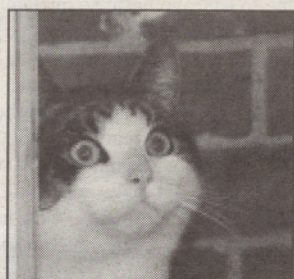
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Office Cat Rooty wants to personally thank all the great men and women who came through on our paper towel drive! It's a tremendous help and keeps our vendor's hands clean. Thank you!