



# Betrayal

## How will the EPD win back women's trust?

★ By Aria Seligmann

The Eugene Police Department is under scrutiny for hiring police officers who are now accused of sexually abusing women. Roger Eugene Magaña is currently being held at Lane County Jail on \$4.2 million bail, and has pled not guilty to a 51-count indictment on alleged sexual abuse and rape charges. Juan Francisco Lara has been convicted on 10 charges and is accused of forcing seven women to perform sex acts, using the police database to uncover victim information and promising to make criminal charges against another woman “go away” in return for sexual favors.

Not only is a criminal investigation of the ex-police officers under way, but community workers, researchers and politicians are looking closely at the internal dynamics of the EPD that allowed such activity to occur.

No one at the EPD will discuss either case because of gag orders issued by Lane County Circuit Court Judge Jack Billings for the Lara case, and by Lane County Circuit Court Judge Karsten Rasmussen in the Magaña case. Meanwhile, new Police Chief Robert Lehner is “not available” for even brief comment until Feb. 9.

That leaves questions unanswered and the public curious about just what the EPD plans to do to win back the public trust.

EPD Public Information Director Pamela Olshanski says many in the police department “would love to speak on this, because they’ve all been painted with the same broad brush.”

Yet no one at the EPD has requested the gag order be lifted.

Others, she says, “want to be thoughtful about what they say because they don’t want it interfering with prosecution of the cases.”

Meanwhile, community leaders hope the EPD will look hard at what led to the alleged abuses.

Sexual Assault Support Services (SASS) Director Jean Blanchard says she believes the EPD “has fostered a climate that allows this to happen.” Because SASS does advocacy for survivors who sometimes choose to report to police, she says, “We have been aware of some of the stereotypes of women survivors that are held by police officers. One I have personally observed is a basic distrust of victims’ stories.”

Questions often asked of survivors “really suggest that they may be lying and in my personal experience with other types of crimes that’s rarely an assumption an officer has,” says Blanchard.



For instance, she says, rarely does a police officer say “Prove to me you’ve been burglarized or on what basis do I believe your story.” But in her work with survivors, she says that’s often the case when they are questioned by certain EPD officers.

Now, with allegations of criminal activity against two officers in the public eye, there is a “basic betrayal of trust on the part of the public and on women in particular,” Blanchard says. “We’re all taught to respect police officers, that they are going to protect us. When they abuse that power and trust it’s a tremendous sense of betrayal.”

City councilor and mayoral candidate Nancy Nathanson says, “At any point in time someone may need to rely on the police for help right away, and you have to know that who shows up to help you is coming not only with a professional demeanor, but also with a good heart.”

Deborah Olson, UO assistant professor of special education and a member of the UO

Center for Women in Society interest group on violence against women, says such actions by police officers “break any sense of trust women might have.”

With many Eugene women now fearing the police, some are wondering how a woman should deal with a police officer who approaches her.

“I think women need to be very cautious. Because that’s the approach we need to take when our trust has been betrayed,” says Blanchard, adding, “I would be very reluctant to stop my car at night when a police officer has their lights on at this point in time. My sense of trust in the police system is at a

*‘I hope the department will look for public ways to convey their commitment to the safety of all women in our community, especially the most vulnerable – and will also make clear a safe way that such exploitation can be reported without fear of reprisal.’ – Kitty Piercy*

very low level, so I’d drive to a public place like a 7-11 or something and then stop where there are others around.”

An even more intimidating situation occurs when a police officer knocks at the door. “Only let them in if they have a warrant,” says Blanchard. “Just because someone is a police officer doesn’t give them entitlement to do things like come into your house,” without one, she says.

Ultimately, however, Blanchard says putting the onus on women to know how to protect themselves is the wrong way to look at the situation, because “it shifts the burden onto the woman or onto the one being assaulted to being responsible for actions that someone else is going to take.”

She says to look at the matter in a different way, to ask what the police department and law enforcement can do to reduce the likelihood of such attacks occurring.

Naturally, things are feeling pretty raw over at the police station. Olshanski says the

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new chief is “committed to looking internally at what can be made better.” While Olshanski says no one can speak for the chief, “He recognizes that any action at this level has a significant breach of community trust and the goals are to look at what in the system allowed this to happen and how to improve it.”

An overhaul of the system shouldn’t include “making changes for the sake of making changes,” says Olshanski, but there should “certainly be forums, as well as a Police Commission and public hearing.”

Nathanson says she will advocate for the Police Commission to have the opportunity to review the hiring process and systems that are in place “to ensure when we’re recruiting and choosing officers we’re selecting based on skills and abilities but also on backgrounds and other factors to make sure they’re going to fit into the high standards for Eugene and the entire community.”

Another component Nathanson says she would like to see addressed is “What kinds of values are being imparted during the training process?” To uncover that answer, Nathanson says, “The Police Commission will be involved.”

Mayoral candidate Kitty Piercy says “Certainly, the Eugene police force and the entire community found the exploitive illegal behavior of these two officers appalling. I

assume that an internal examination will produce recommendations to strengthen the department’s oversight, training and sensitivity. And, I hope the department will look for public ways to convey their commitment to the safety of all women in our community, especially the most vulnerable — and will also make clear a safe way that such exploitation can be reported without fear of reprisal.”

One such way to look at issues involving police and the community is to have academics and community leaders meet to share research findings and how they might be applied to working with individuals. Such a forum, says Olson, occurred last fall, and one forum is planned for the future, though no date has yet been set.

Ultimately, according to Olson, the solution is “putting the burden on the Police Department to make amends to the community for this breach of trust. That’s an important aspect.”