

## TALK OF THE TOWN

And each new post gives birth to serpentine comment threads — fertilized with equal parts schadenfreude and wound-salt, vicious, triumphant or combative, occasionally concerned and sometimes even helpful — that members spool out in response to this or that serialized tragedy of the human condition: gunshots heard, car collisions witnessed, criminal mischief on the run. People behaving badly.

Sometimes, those comment threads get so tangled up in tangents of backtalk it's hard to keep track of the original post.

Altogether, the picaresque portrait of reality presented by *Lane County Mugshots Uncensored* is at once medieval and populist, a digital vision of our community that combines the vigilante justice of the Wild West with a kind of Hobbesian cyber-cynicism, giving the impression that Eugene is gripped by a queasy chaos that makes life nasty, brutish and coked to the gills on drugs, especially crank and heroin.

A member post from May 5 reads, unedited:

"Eugene used to be so safe back in the day. Well a month ago my stepfathers license plates were stolen and last night my grandfathers car was broken into. Cops don't even bother with this they just send the forms in the mail. What the hell is Eugene coming to?"

And among the several dozen comments to this post were these:

"It's a liberal run city. The only people getting in trouble are the ones that can pay those hefty fines."

"I say this every day. I cry and am so afraid to let my kids out of my house. Every day there is more pain. What are we gonna do? Let our beautiful city die to and evil people?"

"When I lived there a cop informed me if someone walked in my house I have to let them rob me and not take matters in my own hands to call cops and wait for them to get therer? Kiss my what? Lao I'll take my chances with a jury on that one ..... crazy!"

"explain to me how everything is the liberals fault it's either the Mexicans or liberals you right wing nut jobs blame"

## THE WIZARD OF ID

Whereas traditional news sources are financed by advertising revenues and staffed by a clutch of editors and reporters, *Lane County Mugshots Uncensored* is run almost singlehandedly by one man, Mike Weber, who, along with the help of four part-time and unpaid administrators, plays blue-collar Wizard to this weird online Oz.

In person, Weber comes across as one of those pure products of Eugene: affable yet cautious, whip-smart and hard-bitten, a town-and-country boy in a baseball cap who straddles rural and cosmopolitan in a way that leads a lot of us, politically and socially, into a wonky form of libertarianism. He is the Northwest equivalent of a Boston "Southie."

A Lane County native and graduate of Elmira High School, Weber graduated from Lane Community College with an automotive painting and metals degree. Before branching off and starting *Lane County Mugshots* on Facebook in 2011, he was a member of Lane County Citizens for Responsible Government — a political activist group that fought EmX expansion — as well as being involved in the online news sites *Lane Today* and *Eugene Daily News*.

Although still up and running, the original Lane County Mugshots, unlike the "uncensored" page, does not allow members to post.

Burnt out on politics and the hard work it takes maintaining a daily news site, Weber, now 52, says he next started *Lane County Mugshots Uncensored* in 2014 as something of a hobby, with the idea that in his spare time he'd be administering a site that could serve as a kind of local crime watch — a place where average citizens could at once observe and participate in a dialogue about the underbelly of the social politics of Eugene, Springfield and broader Lane County.

website that posts mugshots from around the state as well as other criminal events and notices.

Weber says he doesn't profit from any of these pages or sites, which he typically spends his after-work hours administering and updating. One thing he says he's never done and never will do, unlike many such sites around the country, is charge people to have their mugshots taken down — a form of online extortion that has led to protective legislation nationwide, including in Oregon (HB 3467, which went into effect January of 2014, requires sites to remove mugshots for free if the individual charged is found not guilty).

"We're just regular people," Weber says of the small group administering *LCMU*. "We're not super-trained. We're trying to keep some order in the chaos so that the group is useful to the community. We're teetering on that line between making sure people can speak their mind and it doesn't turn into some racist, homophobic thing."

"It's a weird fine line," he adds. "It's indefinable."

## WHY WE COME, WHY WE STAY

A recent survey on *LCMU* asked why members joined the site and why they stay:

"I was new to the area and buying a house and wanted to get a feel for where the crime seemed to be concentrated. Plus I don't watch local news or take a paper. I get 100% of my local news online."

"People who might not express their opinions in public seem to have no qualms when it's on FB. I find it fascinating. Gets me out of the ivory tower."

"I joined for info and stay to remind myself that no one is as nice as I think they are."

"I like knowing what's going [on] around us. I feel like I was in a very sheltered bubble before seeing everything day to day that goes on. And I like that I get to see the good things people do also."

"Because I want to see all the bike thieves and tweaker scum called out and publicly shamed."

"I joined to see my ex husband's mugshot. I stay to laugh if I see him here again lol."

"Don't know why I joined, but good sarcasm and funny idiotic replies is why I have stayed."

"Morbid curiosity."

Last time I checked, *Lane County Mugshots Uncensored* had 42,000 active members; the print circulation of the *Eugene Weekly* averages 40,000. Technically, these two free "news" sources are in a neck-and-neck competition, but whereas the *Weekly* consistently quotes the same dozen or so politicians, policy wonks and so-called experts about what they think is going on in our community, Lane County Mugshots Uncensored lets the people speak for themselves.

Last month, in April, *LCMU* received more than half a million hits, and Weber says he's expecting 750,000 page views on the site in May.

## THE ROAR OF THE MASSES

Weber responds to the shit show that *LCMU* often becomes, especially in the comment threads, with a resolute "don't kill the messenger." Although he admits to being a bit awestruck and often baffled by what the site's become, he nonetheless argues that its a worthwhile "news source" providing insight into the state of reality in the area and the way people feel about it.

As much as you might be distressed or disgusted by what Weber calls the "working class" view provided by *LCMU*, he says it would be a mistake to simply write it off. "Those people are bringing their opinions and ideas and attitudes so everybody can see it," he says of the site's members. "What you're getting is street-level people. I think more affluent people do not want to comment on this because their position in life kind of keeps them from being vocal on any issue. They need to be politically correct."

Weber, for his part, isn't always encouraged by what he sees on his own site. "It just kind of proves the way I thought, that a lot of people are apathetic and negative and uninformed on a lot of issues," he says. "When I read my group, I get the feeling that the vast majority of those



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Like · Reply · 3 · 2 hrs  

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"Heroin, meth, transient central, justice system that does not care about property crime.....that's why it is the way it is."

"Scare tactics deployed ... Screw it, if everybody started exercising their 2A right and starting killing these criminals, it might be less appealing to commit crimes, especially crimes of a violent nature..."

"Liberalism destroys everything and everyone it touches."

"My hope in putting the mugshots out originally was that this area would see the crime, put a face to it," he says. "We were hoping to show the community what's going on. We thought it would be a good community service, but it became obvious that it was a guilty pleasure that people enjoyed."

Weber also administers *Lane County Mugshots: Lost and Found*, a page for "posting lost and found pets, farm animals and items," as well as *Oregon Crime News*, a