

Sheriff's challenger Lehnert says demotion at Pendleton Police made him better

Pendleton corporal running for Umatilla County sheriff

By PHIL WRIGHT
Staff writer

Umatilla County sheriff's candidate Ryan Lehnert lost his sergeant rank with the Pendleton Police Department in June 2009 for not doing his job.

Lehnert, who is challenging incumbent Terry Rowan for sheriff, explained the drop in rank came when he was struggling with the transition from living in a combat zone in Iraq to life back in Eastern Oregon. The demotion, he said, turned out to be better for the citizens of Pendleton, better for the police department and better for him and his children.

"Yeah, it was a demotion," he said, "but I call it a blessing."

The East Oregonian requested and received a copy of the city's personnel file on Lehnert. The 98 pages include his ranks and pay over his 15 years with Pendleton police and several evaluations. It also revealed the department disciplined him in 2009



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

Pendleton Police Cpl. Ryan Lehnert is running against incumbent Terry Rowan for Umatilla County sheriff.

for insubordination, unsatisfactory performance, unbecoming conduct, inattention to duty and improper radio use.

Pendleton Police Chief Stuart Roberts said that resulted in bumping Lehnert from a sergeant back to an officer.

Lehnert, 44, began his law enforcement career in

his early 20s with the sheriff's office before joining Pendleton police. He made corporal in 2003. He also was a member of the Oregon National Guard, and in 2004 he was a platoon sergeant in Iraq overseeing of 30 soldiers.

He returned home in 2006 and resumed his job with Pendleton PD. But

he found he was in serious debt, he said, and the experiences of war stayed with him. He also brought his military attitude to work, which the file shows drew complaints from some officers.

Still, Lehnert said, career advancement was important, and he rose to sergeant. Yet his home life was

crumbling and he needed medication to deal with the stress from combat.

"I didn't want anybody to know I was taking medication," he said. "I was embarrassed and ashamed, so I quit taking them."

Even so, the record shows Lehnert remained a solid criminal investigator. Roberts said those skills, along with Lehnert's ability to relate to others, made him a good fit for the community services officer, a liaison between the police department and public that demanded less on him and his family life.

Lehnert said he made a personal apology to Roberts for failing him and the department. Roberts said Lehnert used the demotion to establish the Apartment Watch Program, which involves dozens of property managers and owners to reduce crime.

Since then, Lehnert said, he grew as an individual and as a police officer and became a better dad. Pendleton police detective Howard Bowen in 2013 even nominated Lehnert for officer of the year. Roberts boosted Lehnert to corporal in 2014. And in 2015, Lehnert took on the assignment of policing nearby Pilot

Rock, which struggled with even maintaining a police department.

Police Sgt. Charles Byram evaluated Lehnert in July and noted during the past couple of years he demonstrated "significant growth in confidence, maturity and responsibility" but still needs to work on "prioritization and management of duties, responsibilities ... At times he allows himself to get over-extended trying to please everyone."

Roberts has endorsed Lehnert for sheriff. He said Lehnert carries an array of leadership skills and he has earned back his trust and the trust of others in the department.

"I wouldn't have endorsed him if I didn't believe he could handle this opportunity," Roberts said.

Lehnert began his career in the sheriff's office, he said, and believes it can do better under his leadership. He said he is ready for the onus of shouldering a law enforcement agency that encompasses patrols, a jail, dispatching calls for service and more.

But he might not have acquired what it takes to do the job, he said, if he had stayed a sergeant.

HOMES:

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"If that was the path they wanted to take, I think this is one of the best programs you can have," he said.

Randy Multon of Mr. Insulation said Cody Boggs worked with one of his employees on the first student-built home in 2014-2015 and afterward that employee recommended him to Multon for an open position at the company. Boggs, who graduated in 2015, has worked for Mr. Insulation for about a year.

"Now he's doing jobs by himself," Multon said.

He said he is always grateful to find someone interested in installing insulation, because it's a job a lot of people won't do because the insulation irritates their skin too much.

Carlos Hernandez, who will return to the student homebuilding program as a high school senior this fall, lucked into a summer job with O So Kleen through his involvement with the program.

O So Kleen, which repairs smoke and water damage in addition to

cleaning, isn't an official industry partner with the homebuilding program, but owner Dave Smith is on the school board and got to know Hernandez while interacting with the homebuilders in that capacity. He was impressed with the young man's detail-oriented approach to trim work on the student-built home and offered him a job doing home restoration work all summer, including trim around windows and doors.

Hernandez said that type of cosmetic work was his favorite part of building a home.

"It's what people see when they walk in the house," he said.

He said O So Kleen was a fun summer job, and he enjoyed the chance to try working without a teacher or mentor constantly looking over his shoulder.

"It's a great opportunity to take what I've been learning and put it to work," he said.

Smith said he was impressed with the quality of Hernandez's work as he watched him work on the student-built home.

"I saw Carlos's enthusiasm, and I had some work

to do this summer," Smith said. "I saw his skill level and motivation. He's enthusiastic and very safety-conscious."

Jason Knutz of Inland Plumbing hired Drex Bailey after he graduated from high school, and Bailey recently got accepted as a plumbing apprentice. Knutz said he enjoyed being an industry partner for the program and working with students like Bailey who are "eager to learn."

"I have no doubt the experience was good for him," he said.

Curt Berger, who runs

the program for Hermiston School District, said he always impresses upon the students that their work in the homebuilding class is being observed by more than 20 local employers over the course of the year.

"I tell them, 'We're on a job interview every day out there,'" he said. "The person watching you could hire you next summer."

Students from Hermiston, Umatilla and Stanfield will be building a third home in the Fieldstone subdivision during the upcoming school year.

ARENA:

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board had received two bids, one from Bothum Construction and another from Kirby Nagelhout Construction Company. Both bids were several hundred thousand dollars over the proposed \$4 million budget for the arena.

Because interested companies have already seen the plans and design, the bidding process should be quick. Revised bids are due Aug. 31 and the board hopes to vote on a bid Friday, Sept. 2.

Byron Smith, Hermiston city manager and EOTEC chair, is confident this will give the board the flexibility it needs to meet the \$4 million budget and move forward with construction. Because of the timeline, Smith said the board wasn't able to do much in the way of re-design, but once they have someone under contract, they can work with that company on cost-cutting redesigns. The board also has committed to reaching out and doing additional fundraising. If are-

na lighting isn't included in the accepted bid, Smith said worst-case scenario would be transitioning to a daytime rodeo.

Before the motion went to a vote, board member Kim Puzey questioned whether the arena would be done in time for the 2017 Farm-City Pro Rodeo.

"The paint's gonna be wet on the stalls and panels," he asked. "but it's going to be ready for next year's rodeo?"

Smith responded, "Yes, that's the plan."

On Thursday, Jeff Deswert from Kirby Nagelhout Construction sent an email that said, "After a great deal of thought and consideration, I believe that the best course of action at this point is for us to allow the board to consider what is in the best interest of the project. We will no longer pursue the project nor will we protest any decision that is made."

After Friday's board meeting, Deswert said the company would be interested to see what the board sends out, but it would likely not persuade the company to submit another bid.



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