



Discrimination:

Rainbow & blue: LGBT issues in law enforcement

Part one of a five part series

By Dr. Berenice Ruhl

Background to the complaint

"I responded to a suicide where a young lesbian killed herself with a gunshot wound to the head. She was at a friend's house at a party. Her ex-lover was quite distraught to the point of hysteria, shouting, 'You don't understand! She was my lover!'

I made a choice then.

I sat her down on the bumper of my car and in front of a calm friend of hers said, 'Yes, I do understand - and you will be able to talk to me.' My explicit eye contact indicated we were all on the same wavelength and she calmed down.

I agonized over the report, telling the truth of the relationship, yet concerned for how the deceased's parents were going to react. The biggest problem of the night of the investigation was the very rude, insensitive, obnoxious behavior of the command officer.

His behavior was unacceptable for any death investigation. Many of the friends of the deceased went to the hospital, where they were mistreated by this man. I gathered all concerned persons into the chapel and was able to answer their questions and offer apologies for the behavior of my superior.

I wanted so badly to confront him with facts, so badly to tell him how what he did offended me, so badly to tell him to treat everyone with compassion...Who could I tell how angry I was?"

This account appears in the personal journal of a Detective Corporal in the Criminal Investiga-

tions Division of a State Police agency in the Midwestern United States, relating an incident that occurred several years ago, when she had revealed her sexual orientation to only a very few select fellow officers. She is now a 19-year-veteran, and is out to her immediate supervisor and most of her colleagues.

Coming out to a higher call

Her decision to provide support to the distraught ex-lover at the scene and to the friends gathered at the hospital, by revealing her own sexual orientation, was courageous indeed. She made a decision to make their welfare her top priority, at the potential risk of her own career advancement.

These are the kinds of difficult decisions made by lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered (LGBT) officers every day, many of whom continue to live in fear of harassment, ridicule and worse at the hands of fellow officers.

Many LGBT officers worry that they will not receive adequate back-up in dangerous situations, and they know they are unlikely to receive support from their union officials. Furthermore, in many instances they have no legal protection against employment discrimination, and are ineligible for many of the benefits taken for granted by their heterosexual colleagues.

The average citizen admits he or she could not imagine doing the dangerous work of the officer on the street, or the often gruesome and frustrating work of detectives. Very

few heterosexual citizens have given any thought to the additional challenges and perils faced by LGBT individuals in law enforcement.

A recent tragedy in Florida has increased awareness among the public about these issues, and underscores both the progress that has been made as well as the need for further progress. Tampa police officer Lois Marrero was a little more than a year away from retiring with a generous pension when she was killed by a suspected bank robber on July 6.

Symbolic gesture is a start

LGBT officers around the U.S. and the world were pleased and comforted to see police officials present a folded flag to Mickie Mashburn, a detective on the force, and Marrero's life partner of 10 years. This gesture of respect, standard procedure for any law enforcement funeral, provides hope that attitudes toward LGBT officers may be changing. So, too, does the reaction of Tampa's citizens, many of whom who took part in a five-mile-long funeral procession.

On the other hand, Ms. Mashburn cannot collect spousal benefits from the department's pension fund because Florida law does not recognize same-sex marriages, and the pension plan only pays a pension to the surviving spouse or children.

I refer to sexual identity as the "final frontier" in diversity awareness. The unique concerns of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered individuals are often overlooked, or given

continued



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only cursory attention, in diversity initiatives. And this is as true (probably more true) in law enforcement settings as anyplace else. Ostracism, discrimination and harassment are all too common.

What are the experiences, concerns and needs of LGBT individuals who do the hard work of law enforcement? And what are the experiences, concerns and needs of LGBT constituents when they interact with law enforcement? What efforts are being undertaken to improve the situation for LGBT officers and constituents, and by whom?

These are issues that will be explored in greater depth in the remaining three articles of this series. ■

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