

From left are Portland police reserve Cmdr. Bob Ball, Sgt. Liani Reyna and Officers Nicholas Newby and Steve Johns. The four appear in a new "It Gets Better" video.

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THE OREGONIAN



Officers share their stories to aid gay, lesbian youths

By **MAXINE BERNSTEIN**
THE OREGONIAN

Portland police Sgt. Liani Reyna, an 18-year bureau veteran, said people have shot at her and tried to run her over on the job.

But those experiences were not as frightening as what Reyna, 43, decided to do this year: to speak openly, on a video produced by the Police Bureau, about growing up as a lesbian. The bureau's "It Gets Better" video debuted Friday on YouTube, launched to coincide with Portland's GayPride week.

"It was scary to be visible," Reyna said, "but I think this is an important enough project."

Seventeen uniformed Portland police officers shared accounts of



See the Portland Police Bureau video at oregonlive.com/portland

their childhoods being gay, lesbian or transgender, their loneliness and depression as teenagers, and the difficulty they had informing their parents or best friends.

All encouraged young people going through such turmoil now, assuring them that their lives would improve as time goes on.

The videos are part of a national project started by Seattle writer and columnist Dan Savage to reassure and support gay and lesbian youths who feel alone and harassed. The

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project was inspired by the 2010 suicide of a 15-year-old Indiana boy who was bullied in school because he was gay.

The project has become popular worldwide, with 50,000 videos created by politicians and celebrities, including President Barack Obama and talk-show host Ellen DeGeneres.

Danny Rosen, a citizen co-chair of the bureau's Sexual Minorities Roundtable, saw a similar video by San Francisco police and suggested that the Portland Police Bureau make one. The chief's office agreed. The Portland officers ranged from the rank-and-file

to a police captain and a police reserve commander. Their comments are painfully frank.

Officer Casey Hettman, 30, said he first told a close male friend in his junior year of high school that he was gay when the friend wouldn't stop goading him to take his friendship with a girl to the next level. "I told him that I thought about hurting or killing myself," Hettman said in the video. "His response to me was, 'Why don't you shut up and do it?'"

Hettman, who grew up in Newport, remembers someone broke his car's lights and flattened its tires. Another tried to run him off the road. He credited his family for helping him through it.

Hettman, who joined the bureau five years ago, said deciding to be part of the video

"wasn't without some contemplation."

"We all had to look inside of ourselves," he said. "I think if there's a chance we can save somebody else's life, it's worth it."

Central Precinct Capt. Sara Westbrook said she started out "hating who I was." But Westbrook, 50, said that when she told her mother she was a lesbian, her mother was only upset that her daughter hadn't felt comfortable telling her sooner.

Police reserve Cmdr. Bob Ball, 45, said his childhood "was very lonely," and he thought he was going to be abandoned by his family.

"I heard family members say derogatory things about gays and lesbians," Ball said.

When he did tell his family, Ball said, "I felt like a mil-

lion pounds of pressure was taken off my shoulders. I felt free, and I felt alive."

The officers said young people struggling with their identities should know that there are resources to support them.

"Don't let people's perceptions of you — or what you think their perceptions are — stop you from being who you are and what you want to do," said Officer Matt Estes, 49.

The bureau unveiled the video at Portland's Q Center, a community center for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

"I feel like today the gift you brought to our community is 17 superheroes," said Executive Director Barbara McCullough-Jones.

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