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An Interview with Penny Harrington about *Triumph of Spirit*

Why did you write *Triumph Of Spirit*?

There are several reasons I wrote *Triumph of Spirit*. First, I want to set the record straight about why I was forced out of the Portland Police Bureau. Second, it is my special way to mentor—to extend my reach to women in law enforcement who may learn from my experiences. Third, I want to reach out to all women, regardless of their career choices—to let them know we can succeed despite the obstacles.

What does the title mean?

Triumph of Spirit accurately depicts my life and my career. Despite the ordeals I faced, I never gave up. Something inside me kept pushing, dreaming, and hoping—and I came out on top. My spirit remains strong, and I hope to inspire others.

What would you do differently, if you were a new recruit?

I don't know that I would do anything different today. Even though women now work patrol, we are far from being accepted as equals in policing. Despite the serious problems I faced in my career and in my personal life by speaking out—I would still raise the issues and fight the battles for equality. Being a police officer is the most rewarding job I can imagine—and one of the most important in our country. I learned about humanity and how our diverse cultures join to make this such a great country.

Is policing a good profession for women? Do women make better cops?

I admire young women and men who are brave enough to join police departments in our toughest cities. And, yes, in some instances women do make better cops! If we define what makes a “good cop” as being able to de-escalate violence, mediate disputes, work in cooperation with people in our communities, and respond appropriately to violent crime—especially issues such as domestic violence—evidence shows that women make better cops.

Women do not use excessive force, they receive far fewer citizens' complaints, they have a style of policing that is naturally "community-oriented," and they take the crime of domestic violence more seriously. And, on any other measure of effectiveness such as arrests, convictions, self-initiated activity—women are just as effective as men.

Do they make better commanders?

Yes. Women are willing to listen to people and deal with the "human" issues that are part of law enforcement. Many men have told me that they would rather work for a woman—that women treat them more fairly. Women bring a different perspective to policing and they are desperately needed at the decision making tables in our police departments.

What is the best way to increase the numbers of women in policing?

Local political leaders must demand that their police agencies be gender balanced. To retain the increasing numbers of women police, departments must root out the male officers and commanders who do not want women in policing, and who make life extremely difficult for them.

Should women be promoted to command positions ahead of men who have seniority?

The issue of seniority is an outdated, militaristic concept that should be abandoned! Women should be promoted to command positions ahead of men if they are the most qualified for the job. Just because you have survived in a department for a long time, does not make you more qualified.

What is the greatest barrier to promotions for women?

There is more than one:

(1) Biased, in-house testing systems where the "good old boys" promote the "good old boys."

(2) The double standard of performance for newly promoted persons. Unless a man really screws up, it is assumed that he will do a good job. Every time a woman is promoted, she must prove herself all over again—despite her good track record. Many women do not even try for promotions because they do not want to go through this intense, on-going scrutiny.

(3) Outdated personnel policies that do not allow any flexibility for women who have dependent children. When you receive a promotion, you are placed at the bottom of the seniority ladder for shift, days off, assignments, etc. Women, who are frequently the primary care-givers in the family, are often unwilling to put their families through this disruption.

Can women handle the stress?

Of course women can handle the stress! Women handle stress in all walks of life and they can deal with crime victims, criminals, danger, and death. It is the stress of being an outsider in your own department, put under a microscope, criticized for every mistake, and harassed beyond belief—that is the stress that forces women to leave policing.

How did you handle it?

I learned from experience that the best way is to stay balanced: to keep non-police friends and close ties with family, to stay involved with the community, and to participate in activities outside of policing. In other words, don't buy into the "old" police culture of drinking after work, cheating on your spouse, and developing a totally negative attitude toward the community. If a certain aspect of the job causes severe stress, then seek counseling. Most police agencies have counseling services available.

What is your most significant achievement in law enforcement?

It is hard to pick just one "most significant achievement." The one that meant the most to me was becoming Chief of Police. However, the things I did to open policing to women are a source of great pride to me. Also, raising my son as a single mother and seeing him become a wonderful, happy man is heartwarming.

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