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OPTIONS

Rhode Island's
Lesbian & Gay
Newsmagazine

FREE

VOL XVI, NO. 2 ▼ MARCH 1997

▼ JOHN BLAKESLEE

Providence Police continued their crusade against gay men frequenting River Road with nine arrests in the first ten days of February, six of which appeared in the *Providence Journal's* police log. Police spokesperson Captain John Ryan estimates fifty arrests have been made in undercover operations at River Road since last July in response to neighborhood complaints. The latest charges were for soliciting from a motor vehicle or loitering for indecent purposes, and in every case detectives said subjects proposed having sex. Plainclothes detectives noted in many arrest reports that subjects inquired repeatedly if they were cops, to which they responded "no."

Whom to Believe

Police repeatedly claim that undercover detectives do not entrap victims or lead men into illegal situations to which they were not predisposed. Police versions differ widely, however, from that of men arrested. Ryan says detectives wait until they are solicited before making arrests. Arrestees say the detectives actively "came on" to them and they were booked whether or not they accepted the sexual overtures of police. Detectives are working the area where men are parked rather than the woods where alleged sex is taking place.

One man was arrested after arranging to meet a detective at a coffee shop, while another man reported being approached while eating his lunch in his car, as he has been doing for eleven years. The latter "got a creepy feeling" and he started his engine. As the officer pointed a gun at his head and

ordered him to unlock his door, three more police suddenly appeared, dragged him from his car and handcuffed him.

The Undercover Cop

Advocates familiar with these operations allege key points on arrest reports are made up to make charges stick. Jodi Ericson of *The Phoenix*, writing in October, 1996, quoted Ryan as saying that the arrest subject need only be predisposed. This could be as simple as saying "hello" to undercover police. What the cops say after that doesn't really matter, according to Ryan. In arrest reports, police even

detrimental is the humiliation resulting from publishing names and addresses in local papers. For gay men, often first time offenders, being taken to the station in handcuffs and treated derisively by police is a life altering experience and can lead to thoughts of suicide.

The Courts

Solicitation from a motor vehicle, disorderly conduct and loitering for indecent purposes are considered misdemeanors. At hearings, defendants have been offered the chance to plead *nolo contendere*, which has the same effect as a plea of guilty. In return

for a donation to the victim assistance fund and a 'filing' of charges for one year, charges are held open for that time. After the specified time and without further arrests, the court can be petitioned to expunge the records. This requires further legal representation. Pleading *nolo* brings the nightmare to a quick end.

Although the man arrested while eating lunch wanted justice and to expose police who abuse their authority, he worried about how further publicity would affect his career. He preferred a quick

resolution rather than declare his innocence.

One man has pleaded "not guilty" to soliciting charges and his case has yet to be heard. When considering whether to undertake the ordeal of an innocent plea, he heeded advice given him: It is not a good idea to plead guilty to charges of a crime you have not committed.

For those who plead innocent, the court procedures are long, tedious, and costly. The verdict is decided by a judge and since police have not carried hidden microphones, it is a case of the victim's word against that

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Police Head to River Road

admitted to leading victims on with lines like, "I'm having a dry week," or "I just broke up with my wife and could use some company." One report related a detective lifting up his sweatshirt and asking his victim, "Like what you see?"

Since the undercover cop is the only one to hear the exchange with the victim, he wields enormous power. Abuse of this power is tempting to someone who may believe gays are their enemies or moral inferiors. Police are well aware that punishment meted out by courts for these misdemeanors is minimal, but far more

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3rd URI Symposium

The 3rd Annual Symposium on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues will be held April 10, 11 & 12. This year's theme is "Perspectives on Progress." The Symposium is designed to create a safe space for the LGBT community to come together and exchange ideas, research and experience. Karen Marshall will give the keynote address on Thursday evening, speaking about her experience as the Director of San Diego's Lesbian and Gay Men's Community Center. Symposium events will also include a mini-film festival, a display of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, and an art show. The planning committee has worked hard to make the Symposium and related events (including the kickoff concert with Suede on April 1) inclusive and free of charge for all participants. The costs are being covered by the sponsorship of American Airlines, URI's "H & H" Committee and several other on-campus groups. American Airlines' support is being provided by the gift of two round trip airline tickets for anywhere in the continental US. The tickets will be raffled at \$5 each on Saturday the 12th. Questions can be directed to Bill Barte at 874-4784, Lois Cuddy at 874-4671 or, electronically, to Holly Nichols at: HNIC7063@URIACC.URI.EDU. The April issue of *OPTIONS* will include the Symposium's complete schedule.

IN MEMORIAM

William Bagley, Jr.

OPTIONS notes with sadness the passing of Bill Bagley on December 27th. In the early 90's Bill and his friend Frank DeLuca wrote a series of fun and funny profiles of area clubs and bars for the magazine. We missed the reviews when Bill was no longer able to work on them, and now we will miss Bill himself, who was, as Frank recently put it, a good soul. Rest in peace. ▼