



## Carolyn Bailey papers

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# Penny Harrington

FOR EXCELLENCE AND DETERMINATION IN BECOMING THE FIRST WOMAN POLICE CHIEF OF A MAJOR AMERICAN CITY, AND, ONCE IN OFFICE, FOR CHAMPIONING CIVIL RIGHTS AND HUMANE VALUES. ► By PENNY ALLEN

**L** IN A TRIUMPHANT BLAZE OF light last January, a smiling and proud Penny Harrington of Portland, Oregon, became the first woman police chief of a major American city. As a result, the world media suddenly focused on Portland and its attractive, curly-haired "lady cop" who wears, not a uniform, but tailored suits, silk blouses, and sling-back pumps. Harrington is a late 20th-century milestone.

The new chief was eagerly scrutinized: the 42-year-old career police officer grew up lower-middle-class, ethnic German, in Lansing, Michigan, daughter of an anti-union steel plant line supervisor and a homemaker. A visit to a local police department while in high school sealed her career choice, and she worked her way through college as a legal secretary. She met her first husband at Michigan State and, after graduation in 1964, they went west to Portland, both planning to become police officers. He was hired. She wasn't. She worked as a Kelly Girl while developing a plan to get into the force.

Eventually, Harrington persuaded Portland's mayor to increase the tiny quota of females in the segregated Women's Protective Division of the Police Bureau, and she was hired to work with juveniles. Twenty years later, Harrington had both proven her excellence and sued her way up through the ranks to the top of the very male Portland Police Bureau.

It started like this: after six years in the protective division with only a short time off to give birth to her son Brian in 1967, "policewoman" Harrington got tired of seeing notices for "policemen" to apply to take the competitive exam for promotion to detective. So in 1971 she

filed a civil rights complaint to change the term "policemen" to "police officers." She won the case and soon afterward became the bureau's first woman detective. But she didn't stop there.

"Once I decided to file civil rights complaints," Harrington recalls, "I knew I could never quit filing, or quit making waves...or *quit*, for that matter." Indeed, she became the bureau's first woman sergeant, lieutenant, and captain, in that order, filing an astounding 42 complaints and winning virtually all of them. Throughout the years, however, she was always good at her assignments, from investigating burglary to commanding the planning division. She was open, honest, and independent—a scrapper who knew what she wanted and how to get it.

Harrington had been commander of one of Portland's three police precincts for two and a half years, gaining a reputation for giving her officers everything they needed, from equipment to ideas, when she was rewarded with the top police job by the city's new mayor, Bud Clark. Elected in 1984 as a "people's mayor," Clark was himself the focus of considerable media attention for his unorthodox behavior, the most notable example being the now-famous 1979 poster that shows him, back to the camera, flashing a statue of a naked woman above the caption "Expose Yourself to Art." A week into her new job, Chief Harrington was asked on NBC's "Today Show" if her appointment was another one of Mayor Clark's "stunts." "No, I'm qualified for the job," she answered, irritated but smiling, holding her tongue, still new to the wild-card media.

In reality, Harrington's winning hand with Mayor Clark had been their shared enthusiasm for using neighborhood activism to erase a long-standing



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