



City of Portland Oral History Program

Police Accountability and the Independent Police Review Oral History

LaVonne Griffin-Valade
Transcript
2023

CONTENT WARNING: This interview discusses sensitive subjects including police violence and death. Statements made in this interview are the recollections and views of the interviewee, not the City of Portland Archives.



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LaVonne Griffin-Valade Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: LaVonne Griffin-Valade

Interviewer: Devin Busby

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Location: City of Portland Archives and Records Center, Portland, Oregon

Transcribed by: Teresa Bergen

Devin Busby: My name is Devin Busby and I'm with Morgen Young. We're interviewing LaVonne Griffin-Valade for the City of Portland Oral History Program. It's April 27, 2023. We're in the Portland Archives and Record Center here in downtown Portland. Thanks for being. So, the first question—

LaVonne Griffin-Valade: Thanks for—

DB: Go ahead.

LGV: Thanks for inviting me.

DB: You became auditor in 2009 when Gary Blackmer left office. What was the role that IPR played at the time that you came into office?

LGV: IPR took complaints from community members and investigated those and then made recommendations to the Police Bureau for some changes if they saw a reason to do that.

DB: When you became city auditor, how did you feel about having IPR under the—

LGV: I was very excited. I had never had the experience of being in charge of a police oversight organization. But I was very excited about IPR's work and about the opportunity to be able to have some input and advice and internal learning that we could provide for the general Police Bureau in some way. And I really liked the people that were in charge of IPR. Wonderful folks. Mary-Beth Baptista and Constantin Severe.

DB: Describe any successes or challenges you had related to IPR during your first year as city auditor.

LGV: So, there were plenty of challenges. The Police Bureau was not, I mean, the leadership at the Police Bureau was not really interested in making much change because they didn't see a problem.

And it was, it was the sort of collaboration with Commissioner Randy Leonard that spurred the entire thing, the entire change to what the police oversight body, IPR, had the authority to do. For instance, they at the time they couldn't interview retired police officers from the bureau. And their investigations were not truly a full investigation. And that's what we, that's where we started. And then with the energy and concern from Mary-Beth Baptista and Constantin Severe, we began moving forward. And thankfully we had the help of former Commissioner Randy Leonard to help us kind of make that first thrust into the whole world of making a change to this organization.

DB: So, you mentioned Mary-Beth and Constantin. What was it like to work with them? And as directors, how did their styles differ and how did that affect how IPR served the community?

LGV: I think that they both, they learned together, because they came onboard practically at the same time. She's a hard charger and very dedicated and smart. And was eager to make sure that the bureau was getting on track. And Constantin was a bit more measured in his approach to the bureau. But both of them worked very well together and with me. And I felt very strongly about their belief and knowledge of the justice system and what they wanted to pursue in order to make the organization an organization that was really doing the work of the citizenry. And also, hopefully improving the Police Bureau.

DB: In 2008, prior to you taking office, an external evaluation report of the division had been released. What were some of the changes that came out due to the findings?

LGV: You know, I really am not familiar. And if I was familiar, I don't even recall. I'm fairly certain you asked that question of Constantin and Mary-Beth. And they probably were able to provide you more information about it. But I don't think I can.

DB: What were IPR's responsibilities regarding police accountability? And what as IPR not responsible for?

LGV: So, IPR was responsible for taking certain concerns and complaints from the community members and from others who happened to be in the city visiting and needed a place to complain maybe about police officer actions. And I think the biggest thing that was an impediment to them doing their job was to not be a voting member on the Police Review Board. And that is the board set up by the Portland Police Bureau to litigate, if you will, the concerns about a police officer's actions and words. And they couldn't, they weren't a voting member of that. And so, the initial action before council allowed them to be voting members of the Police Review Board. So that added to our gravitas, if you will, about what our station was after the council agreed to that. And that's, that is the biggest change that we were able to make by that particular action before council.

DB: How did Portland's police accountability system compare to other cities in the country?

LGV: I don't have a lot of knowledge about that, except I would go to the national association, oh, the association of organizations that were providing oversight to their police bureaus, and members of the police force in their cities. Not a lot of them had the same kind of power at all. But I'm fairly certain that Mary-Beth and Constantin have a lot more knowledge and a lot more specifics about what went on in other cities. Because I was also in charge of seven other bureaus or, excuse me, programs. And that detail was not of much interest to me. I wanted to know what was going on in our city.

DB: Describe how the relationship between IPR and the Portland Police Bureau's Internal Affairs office evolved over the time that you were in office.

LGV: It improved greatly. And some of that had to do with whoever was in charge, was the IA, that's the internal affairs of the Police Bureau, whatever person was in charge of that. And usually it was the captain, a captain. And they were usually the liaison to IPR. And I have a memory of right before leaving office that Captain Dave Famous was in the office visiting with Constantin and me. And he wanted to go even further with our work. And I said, "well, I'm only here for a few more months and then I'm leaving office." And he didn't know. And he was very concerned that officer behavior might backslide because I was leaving. And I don't think that that was necessarily the case. But I really felt like he understood where we were coming from and what we were trying to do. And he was a party to it. And that was pretty significant and unusual, I think, for someone from the Police Bureau, a captain, to recognize the need to really continue to add pressure to the Bureau members to perform their duties lawfully and without any kind of manhandling or woman-handling, if you will, of citizens, regular citizens, that they have come in contact with.

DB: In 2010, City Council voted to increase oversight authority of IPR. Can you describe your role in getting these code changes passed? And how did this increase the authority of IPR?

LGV: Well, those changes wouldn't have occurred if I hadn't been onboard and the leader. And if I hadn't had Constantin and Mary-Beth's knowledge, vision, and support behind me. And, I will say for the 2010 changes that we made, we couldn't have done it without the support and guidance of Commissioner Randy Leonard, who helped us sort of wrangle with other commissioners who may not have been all that interested in fighting that battle.

DB: How did the relationship between IPR and the Police Bureau more broadly evolve during your time in office?

LGV: Well, we kept coming back for more. And with each time that we came back, it was the same sort of back and forth with all the council members and with the Police Bureau, and convincing them that we needed just a little bit more. We needed more. We needed to strengthen the organization, meaning IPR, so that we could help the Police Bureau improve its, how they were perceived, but also what they were doing.

DB: Do you have an example of one of those changes that strengthened—

LGV: Well, I think I already mentioned the one I was thinking of, which is that they, because it was a big deal to have them be, to have IPR be a voting member of the Police Review Board. Because that board made decisions about, they didn't make decisions about discipline, because that was the chief's role, but they made decisions about, they investigated their colleagues. And that's a hard thing to do. And to have an outside body participate in those discussions and an outside body with knowledge and with whom they had an actual relationship, working relationship, I think made a lot of difference to the Police Bureau. I don't think it made as much as we wanted it to. I don't think it made as much as the public wanted it to.

DB: Did specific cases have an impact on IPR? For example, the officer-involved shooting of Aaron Campbell?

LGV: Yeah, I thought about that. And that case did have a lot of impact. But it came after the 2006 death of James Chasse. And I think, from our perspective, anyway, and certainly from mine, that that was a case that really started the US, the federal folks, it piqued their interest and they wanted to know about—and then, other examples followed, which further piqued the interest of the federal government. But yeah, that was horrible. He was beaten and tied up in sort of a mangled position and had broken bones and had a punctured lung as a result of that interaction. And if that doesn't get people's attention, I don't know what will.

DB: As city auditor, how did you go about advocating to strengthen IPR and what changes happened as a result?

LGV: Oh, I'm going to say a bad word here.

DB: That's okay.

LGV: I was a bitch. No, I mean, you just have to be tough. You have to first have the evidence to make your case. And then you—not just me, I had “soldiers” with me and behind me. And I think that there's an article, probably in *Willamette Week* from those times where Constantine is saying, “We'll go to bar mitzvahs, we'll go to birthday parties, we'll go anywhere to talk to the public about what that division was doing and what progress we made.” So, I'm not sure I answered your question there.

DB: What led the US Department of Justice to begin investigating the Portland Police Bureau in 2011?

LGV: I think it was the James Chasse case initially. And then, I mean, certainly the Aaron Campbell case. For a time, there it seemed like not just deaths in custody, but not following police procedure and many of those cases piqued their interest. I know it certainly had piqued ours. And for instance, I hired the Office of, oh, god. Sorry. The Office of Internal Review, OIR. They're from Los Angeles. They look at a lot of police departments and do examinations of those kind of cases, in particular, officer-involved shootings and in-custody deaths. And they help different police bureaus in different jurisdictions with policy. Anyway, we hired them to help us kind of vet all of those incidents.

DB: Were there any other impacts the investigation had on IPR?

LGV: Well, I think all of those cases had an impact on IPR in the sense that there were moments when you could feel like you weren't doing enough, or how do we get a handle on this? I'm not sure that we have yet. And I know that there's a new body that is going to be looking at, that is voted in by the voters, and I wish them luck. But I don't know. I mean, I don't know what else we could have done.

DB: If you don't mind, because you brought it up, do you want to just discuss, do you have an opinion on the new system that the voters approved of in 2020?

LGV: A lot of people think they know how to do this, how to rein in the police when it's needed. And a lot of people don't realize the intricacies of a police bureau and trying to make change in an organization that is paramilitary is very difficult.

DB: Going back, do you want to discuss the code changes related to IPR that occurred in 2010 and 2013?

LGV: I really don't remember the details of all of those. I mean, I know each time was to make further and further improvement, not only to the Police Bureau, but to our organization in order to meet the needs of the community. So, the more we, the more authority and access to the Police Bureau we had, the more we saw that needed to be improved. And so that's why we continued going forward with changes. And we convinced the City Council. And that's the main part.

DB: Given the time, effort, and funding invested in police accountability over the decades, is Portland better off?

LGV: I hope so. I think so. I don't know about this new entity. I wish them luck. But it's never as easy as you think it's going to be. Because you think everybody's on your side. And they're not. There are a lot of folks out there who want that kind of strong police department attitude of being tough. And without consideration of, I mean, the Bureau I think has worked on attitudes towards different races and they still need to continue doing that. The more that you can make those efforts to make the organization much stronger and much more responsive to the community, I don't care how many times you have to go back and make little improvements in your organization in order to make improvements in the Police Bureau. You just do that.

DB: What can the city do better regarding police accountability and citizen oversight?

LGV: Well, I'm hoping this new stab at it works well. I mean, I feel very strongly that IPR was an excellent organization and we were making progress. And you know, it was truly a three steps forward and at least one step back all the time. I'm not sure how to overcome that with a police organization. And I regret saying that, because I thought I knew what we should do just based on the training of the folks who worked for me and based on going to conferences and listening to other oversight bodies talk about their experiences and learn from that. And also teach from going there. But I guess that's not how the city council ended up feeling was working.

DB: Then we're down to the last one. Are there any questions you wish I'd asked, or anything you want to address?

LGV: I think I have a question I wish you'd asked me if I was happy with the step that we'd taken to improve the oversight of police, and improve the Police Bureau. Because I was. I thought it was one of the most important things that I did. Can I leave it there?

DB: Yeah.

LGV: No, I honestly, I mean, IPR did great audit work. The other divisions of the Auditor's Office are fabulous, are run by fabulous managers. Being in charge of IPR and improving the work they did and working with those people and making tiny little changes to the Police Bureau is the most important thing outside of my family that I've ever done.

DB: Thank you so much. We really appreciate it. Is there anything else you want to add?

LGV: Oh, the other thing I wanted to say about Mary-Beth and Constantin, because they have different personalities, as you may have noticed. They always laughed at my jokes. So I really looked forward to that before I came onboard as the Portland city auditor. I looked forward to working with IPR in a way that has significance for my community.

I don't think I said enough about OIR. Because I think that just recently, and maybe it's still happening, they gave their last report to city council. And they are a fabulous organization and we were very fortunate to have them onboard. To be, to work with us and work for us, but to kind of guide us in some things that they had more expertise in. So, I'm really pleased that we had the opportunity to work with that organization.

Yes, OIR stands for Office of Independent Review. And they're nationally known. And I don't know if you, I'm just telling you that because, again, they worked for us and worked with us. And served us very well.

I think it's important that folks know that we also always, whenever we were contemplating taking a matter before council for a change in our oversight duties, responsibilities, that we would meet with community members. And a lot of community member organizations are not, were not happy with the police. And I'm sure that that's still the case. So, we always participated in those kinds of meetings. They were interesting and meaningful. And I think it was good for us to have the opportunity to interact, even though there are some diehards like Mr. [Dan] Handelman. I think he was pleased with at least some of what we managed to accomplish. He and others.

The James Chasse case, I think, because first of all there is no, nothing is written about or reported about in-depth, none of those investigations, until the investigations were fully closed by the Police Bureau. And that often takes many years. So, when they finally closed the James Chasse case and then we could hire an organization to really delve into that particular case and write a report, we did. We hired OIR and then continued to hire them after that. And I spent almost an entire summer going through their report and taking that in and realizing that case, that case was so horrible. He was beaten badly and hog-tied. I think I've already talked about that. But it took me a summer basically to read the report. And another staff member. And figure out what we wanted to do next then.

I think that's it. I'll let you people go.

DB: That was wonderful. Thank you so much for doing that.