

LOCAL

# Only Minneapolis police officer formally disciplined for misconduct tied to the department's riot response has left job, Minnesota

She alleged she had long been target of bias in MPD.

By **Andy Mannix** (<https://www.startribune.com/andy-mannix/6370473/>) Star Tribune |

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Colleen Ryan is an openly gay, liberal feminist who wears T-shirts emblazoned with Ruth Bader Ginsburg quotes.

She's also the only Minneapolis police officer formally disciplined for misconduct tied to the department's riot response last year that prompted repeated allegations of unchecked police brutality.

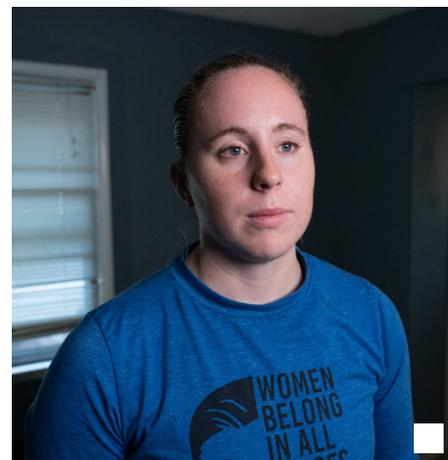
Ryan's infraction: speaking without permission to a magazine columnist about what she called a toxic, para-militant police culture that breeds dangerous officers like Derek Chauvin.

The 29-year-old quit her job Oct. 21 and left Minnesota a week later for a new career outside the country. Ryan also filed a complaint with the Minnesota Department of Human Rights, alleging her former employer discriminated against her because she's a lesbian who advocated for "women and queer officers" in the workplace. The state is investigating the charge.

The complaint says police leadership cited the unsanctioned interview — her only discipline — in denying her a job as a field training officer this year. As of June, the department had promoted two straight men on her shift, the complaint says. One of the men violated the department's search and seizure policy, Ryan said, and the other has an open DWI case.

When Ryan raised the disparity, the field training sergeant said the force could not risk Ryan putting her "personal agenda above the department while training new recruits out on the streets," according to the complaint.

The Minneapolis Police Department (MPD) declined an interview for this story, but city spokesman Casper Hill said in a statement: "The City takes all allegations of discrimination and harassment very seriously and will participate in any investigation by the Minnesota Department of Human Rights. The Minnesota Government Data Practices Act limits what we can say regarding this matter."



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Former Minneapolis police officer Colleen Ryan

Ryan, who agreed to speak with the Star Tribune and FRONTLINE PBS last week, a day before she left the country, said she endured years of harassment in what she described as a misogynistic and homophobic culture running deep within the department. She described a cultlike adherence to former President Donald Trump's "Back the Blue" politics, which she said has given rise to an "us vs. them" complex among officers toward the communities they serve. In 2019, police Lt. Bob Kroll, who was then head of the Minneapolis police union, appeared onstage with Trump during a rally downtown.

Once fellow officers learned she supported Hillary Clinton for president in 2016 and marched against Trump, they refused to partner with her and stalled in backing her up during dangerous calls, she said.

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"It was a long 6½ years with the department," Ryan said, sitting in her sparse northeast Minneapolis living room among stacks of luggage. "I dealt with constant harassment, sexual harassment, discrimination. And, ultimately, I didn't feel like I had much of a long-term future within MPD."

Ryan does not support efforts to dismantle the Police Department and replace it with a public safety agency. But the experience she described offers a rare glimpse behind the curtain of a police department that filters all public-facing messaging through a media relations office and top brass such as Chief Medaria Arradondo. Only the union leadership is permitted to speak for the rank-and-file without permission. Ryan said this communications restraint gives a distorted view of the systemic problems facing the department — especially for outsiders such as her.

"If we could speak freely, I don't think it would reflect very well on how they treat us and how they run the department," she said.

Born in Houston and raised in Iowa, Ryan moved to the Twin Cities to study political science at the University of St. Thomas in 2010. She wanted to become a cop to help victims of domestic abuse and sexual assault.

Ryan said she enjoyed the daily work of policing and thought she was making a difference.

She noticed the machismo culture and knew she didn't fit the standard mold for an officer, but she believed the department needed more women. And she hoped she could help transform the culture from inside.

"Within the first week, everyone knew I was liberal," she said. "Everyone knew I was a feminist. Everyone knew I was gay."

Ryan said her colleagues started to turn on her after a shift working a Clinton campaign event when she could not contain her excitement to get a picture with the first woman nominated by a major party to run for president.

"Everyone questioned why I would want to meet her," Ryan recalled. "It was the narrative of, 'Well, she hates cops.'"

Trump had positioned himself against the "anti-police" Democrats, but Ryan said she could not share her colleagues' enthusiasm for a candidate who had been accused of sexual assault and who boasted about grabbing women by the genitals. Yet in the eyes of her colleagues, voting for Clinton meant supporting the enemy, she said.

"They thought I was voting against them," said Ryan.

The day after the election, a fellow officer texted her a picture of a message written on the roll-call white board of her precinct: "4th Precinct Mids ... Making America Great Again." Ryan provided a copy of the image to the Star Tribune.

That January, Ryan joined protesters in St. Paul for the 2017 Women's March.

She posted a picture to Facebook of herself carrying a sign that labeled Trump a sexual predator over the message: "I stand with survivors." She didn't tell anyone at work she was attending the rally, and she didn't think any fellow officers could see her Facebook page. But the next day, a colleague texted her a screenshot of the photo. "Everyone in the department has seen this," he said, according to a screenshot of the text.

"Cops in the precincts I didn't even work in had seen the picture," Ryan recalled. "To this day, I don't know how it spread so quickly."

Afterward, the officers on the Fourth Precinct's middle watch shift refused to ride with her while her partner was on leave, she said.

She remembered responding to a car accident, where a fight was breaking out. She called for backup. "I could see on the GPS on our squad computers, those squads that were assigned to back me didn't move for a couple minutes," she said.

After that, printouts of memes began appearing in the women's locker room.

Ryan shared pictures of the images with the Star Tribune for this story. One showed a photo of three women in police uniforms over a message boasting the empowerment of learning to shoot and wearing a bullet-resistant vest — "not wearing a [expletive] ridiculous pink hat and 'protest.'"

At the time, the Police Department was run by two women — Mayor Betsy Hodges and Chief Janeé Harteau. Harteau was the city's first openly gay police chief. But that only seemed to embolden the misogynistic jokes, Ryan said.

She considered filing a complaint, but breaking the chain of command amounted to a severe violation of the blue line code, so she kept her head down and made meticulous records of the harassment.

According to those records: A senior sergeant patted her leg and joked about how she didn't use condoms.

After Chelsea Clinton had a baby, an officer suggested Ryan may go "the donor route" for her own pregnancy. After the mass shooting at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Fla., an officer saw her wearing a rainbow memorial bracelet and "remarked that I didn't have to advertise it."

"There were days I thought about calling in sick to work," she said. "But I didn't want them to think they were winning."

The abuse continued after Arradondo took over as chief and Jacob Frey unseated Hodges as mayor, despite promises from the new administration to reform the department.

After George Floyd's murder in May 2020, Ryan worked for weeks responding to the subsequent riots in the Twin Cities, sometimes 18-hour shifts. The unrest took a toll. Some of her friends couldn't understand how she could be part of the same department with officers like Chauvin. Social media users found a recent video on MPD's Facebook page showing her saving ducklings from a sewer. Several sent her death threats.

The senior sergeant who patted her leg continued to make lewd jokes at her expense as she responded to the riots, at one point suggesting Ryan wanted to grab his "tush to prove [she] still liked it," according to Ryan's records. On her third consecutive day on the streets with almost no sleep, the same officer faux-punched her cheek and said, "oh go put some makeup on," her records show. Fed up, sleep deprived and feeling abandoned by her department, Ryan reached out to a columnist for GQ magazine who wrote on women's issues. She knew it was against the rules to talk to a journalist without permission, but "sometimes rules are meant to be broken," she said.

"I was tired of protecting a department that didn't protect me," she said.

The writer agreed to use an alias to protect Ryan, but the article included details about her politics that gave away her identity. Confronted by a supervisor, Ryan admitted she was the article's anonymous source.

Arradondo issued her a written reprimand in December for violating the department's media policy.

The complaint against her, she learned, came from Assistant Chief Mike Kjos, who ranked just below Arradondo in the department hierarchy. He'd been the inspector at the Fourth Precinct when she said her fellow shift officers were icing her out.

Kjos did not respond to calls for comment.

In light of the lawsuits alleging Minneapolis police brutalized people during the riots, Ryan believes that the fact she was the sole officer disciplined sends a clear message about the kind of behavior the Minneapolis Police Department's leadership will and won't tolerate.

After the riots, she filed sexual harassment complaints with the city's human resources department.

She provided detailed descriptions of incidents dating back to 2016, including specific days on which alleged abuse occurred, witnesses, and photos and cellphone screenshots supporting her claims.

Upon learning of the complaint, the senior officer who she said harassed her during the riots retired with no discipline, she said.

Only one officer other than Ryan was interviewed during the investigation. The department refused to make other officers available to human resources, she said.

Despite her criticisms, she said the city needs good police — especially as gun violence continues to rise, which is why she doesn't support the charter amendment. But she said the department needs systemic reforms, including hiring outside leaders to change the culture from the top down, cracking down on bullying and recruiting more women.

"But I can't honestly look a woman in the eyes right now and say, 'You should go apply to MPD,'" she said. "I don't think she'll be safe."

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