

What in the Name of the Bay Bridge Is Going on at the Oakland Police Department?

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[2016 Cops Pedophiles Oakland CA PD... sex worker Celeste Guap](#)

So, I heard a crazy rumor that the city of Oakland, California, went through *three* police chiefs in eight days on the heels of some kind of sex scandal.



Leon Neyfakh

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That rumor is accurate.

Wow. Are all three of them implicated in the sex scandal?

This is not a satisfying answer, but: There hasn't been a ton of clarity on what caused each of the three chiefs to leave. On June 10, Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf said Sean Whent, who had been head of the Oakland Police Department for less than two years, was leaving for "personal reasons." Five days later, Whent's temporary replacement, Ben Fairow, was removed because of some piece of information that the mayor said caused her to lose confidence in him. (According to the *New York Times*, it may have had something to do with an affair Fairow had more than a decade ago.) Then, two days after *that*, Fairow's replacement, Paul Figueroa, announced that he was leaving too. All he said by way of explanation was that he was "deeply sorry" for not being able to "fulfill the functions of acting chief of police."

So far only one of these three men has been linked to the sex scandal, and that's Whent. It's possible that, as more information comes out, the others will be too, but it doesn't seem likely.

Tell me what this sex scandal is about already.

The story starts with a young Oakland police officer named Brendan O'Brien. O'Brien joined the department in 2013 and was married to a woman named Irma Huerta Lopez, who died in June 2014 of an apparent suicide. A little over a year after Lopez's death—on Sept. 25, 2015, to be exact—O'Brien shot himself. The suicide note he left behind triggered the series of events that brought us to where we are today.

What did the suicide note say?

We don't know exactly, because it hasn't been made public. But according to the *East Bay Express*, the alternative weekly that has been driving the coverage of this scandal since it broke, O'Brien's note revealed that he had been romantically involved with a young sex worker who had also been engaged in relationships with other Oakland police officers.

The note alerted the internal affairs division at OPD to the fact that something unsavory had been

taking place. In May—so, about seven months later—four Oakland police officers were placed on administrative leave in connection with a sexual misconduct investigation, and two of them resigned from the department.



Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf in Oakland, California, on May 2, 2015.

Josh Edelson/Getty Images

Were the police officers who were placed on leave suspected of having sex with the same woman O'Brien referred to in his note?

Yes. A few days after the sexual misconduct investigation first made the news, KPIX 5, a local CBS affiliate in San Francisco, reported that the woman O'Brien had mentioned in his suicide note goes by the name "Celeste Guap."

What do we know about her?

For one thing, we know her name isn't really Celeste Guap—it's just a nickname she goes by, and news outlets have declined to reveal her real identity because she is a victim of sex trafficking. We do know Guap is now 18 years old, that she is a sex worker, and that she is the daughter of an Oakland Police Department dispatcher.

If Guap is 18 now, that means she was 17 not so long ago. Are any of the officers suspected of having sex with her alleged to have done so while she was underage?

Yes—according to reporters at the Bay Area News Group, Guap's 18th birthday was in August 2015. In the same report that identified Guap as being at the center of the investigation, KPIX 5 reported that she may have been a minor when some officers had sex with her. Though initially Guap said on Facebook that she had "messed with" only one officer while she was underage, she has since said it was actually three.

So Guap has been speaking publicly about what happened?

Yes, Guap has been speaking out about the situation since the scandal first erupted. First she posted messages on Facebook that seemed to confirm her involvement with Oakland police officers; then, after Chief Whent resigned a few weeks ago, she started speaking to journalists.

In a June 12 interview with the Bay Area News Group, Guap said she started having sex for money at the age of 12. More recently, in an interview that aired on ABC7 of San Francisco, Guap said officers would reach out to her after hearing about her from their colleagues. "I would get texts, you know—I'm an Oakland cop too," she said. "And straight up, they'd just be like, my friend ... told me about you."

How did Guap and O'Brien first come into contact with each other?

Guap told the *East Bay Express* that she met O'Brien in February 2015, when she was 17. O'Brien "saved" her, Guap said, from a pimp who had been chasing her down International Boulevard in East Oakland, and the two of them started "dating" about two weeks later, after another chance encounter on the street. Guap told the *Express* that O'Brien had sex with her "numerous" times while she was a minor.

Did people in the police department know about O'Brien's relationship with Guap before he killed himself?

It would appear so. Citing "multiple city sources," the *Express* reported that a few days before O'Brien's suicide, Guap told an Oakland police sergeant who was friends with her mother that she had been seeing O'Brien since she was 17. We don't know whether that played a role in O'Brien's suicide, but in an interview with CNN, Guap said she believed the officer killed himself because he was "really depressed and our relationship wasn't a secret anymore and he would've lost his job."

In her recent interview with ABC7, Guap said she had been texting with O'Brien on the night of his death and had threatened to reveal their relationship after getting angry with him. According to ABC7, O'Brien shot himself "within hours, perhaps minutes, of that exchange with Celeste."

Has Guap talked about relationships she had with other officers, or how many of them there were in total?

Yes, but she has given slightly different numbers at different times. According to a June 12 story published by the Bay Area News Group, Guap said she has had sex with 24 officers from various police departments in the Bay Area. In her interview with ABC7 she said it was more than 30.

Were they all from the Oakland Police Department?

No. According to Guap, the officers she has been involved with worked in departments all over the Bay Area. According to ABC7, 16 of them are from OPD.

What do we know about Guap's relationships with these officers?

All we know is what she has said in interviews and what can be inferred from screengrabs of text messages and social media interactions that news outlets have posted. Perhaps the most significant thing to note is that some of the officers Guap was involved with allegedly gave her inside information about confidential police operations. For instance, the *Express* published screengrabs of a conversation in which a police officer—who was saved as "Superman" in Guap's phone—advises Guap to stay off a particular stretch of road because of a planned undercover sting operation. Guap wrote back, "Thank u daddy I appreciate it ion wanna go to jail lol."

Have any officers admitted to having sex with Guap?

The *Express* wrote about a retired OPD captain who contacted Guap on Facebook in 2015 and paid her \$250 for sex last December. The *Express* reached the man by phone and asked him about the allegations; after conceding that they were true, he begged the *Express* reporters not to publish his name—a request they honored. “I will die. I have a heart condition,” the anonymous man was quoted as saying.

Have reporters identified any other officers who were involved with Guap?

ABC7 reported that investigators with the Alameda County Sheriff’s Department had identified four deputies who had sex with Guap but closed the file after confirming that she was 18 at the time and that no money had changed hands.

Can we go back the police chief who resigned?

Which one?



Sean Whent.

The first one. You said he was the only one of the three who has been linked to the scandal, right?

That’s right—Sean Whent. His sudden and unexpected departure from the department is what really blew this story open, prompting a blockbuster piece in the *Express*.

OK. So how is he connected?

According to the *Express*, Whent was pressured to resign by Oakland’s independent police monitor, Robert Warshaw, a former

police chief from New York state whose job it is to oversee OPD’s compliance with a set of court-ordered reforms that were imposed on the department 13 years ago. The *Express* reported that Warshaw found out in March that Whent knew about O’Brien’s sexual relationship with Guap.

And that’s why he got pushed out?

Not quite. But the fact that Warshaw’s office hadn’t been informed about the internal investigation sparked by O’Brien’s suicide note was a problem. That’s because it violated an OPD agreement with the federal government that required all internal affairs investigations to be reported to the monitor.

What is this agreement?

The agreement—known formally as a consent decree—was the result of an earlier scandal, which centered around a group of four officers who called themselves the “Rough Riders” and were accused of beating, robbing, and planting evidence on people while they were on patrol in West Oakland. According to *Politico Magazine*, the case ultimately included at least 119 plaintiffs, most of them people of color. In 2003, the suit ended with a \$10.9 million settlement and a commitment from the OPD to implement a series of 51 reforms, including the elimination of racial profiling and a reduction in officer-involved shootings. Failure to comply with the reforms would result in the federal government taking over the department.

Had this consent decree done anything to reform the OPD?

Yes, though it was ineffective for a long time. In 2011, eight years after the agreement was implemented, one of the lawyers who represented the plaintiffs in the Rough Riders case, Jim Chanin, called the process of reform “a total nightmare” and said OPD might be “the worst department in the country.”

Starting in 2014—about five years after a transit police officer shot Oscar Grant at Fruitvale Station—the Oakland Police Department seemed to really be turning around. One of the reasons was Sean Whent, who became chief after proving himself as head of OPD’s internal affairs department. Whent is widely perceived to have brought about real change in Oakland thanks to his commitment to complying with the consent decree. The police department has seen substantial reductions in civilian complaints and use-of-force incidents—while also seeing drops in crime. Before the sex misconduct allegations came to light, in other words, OPD was starting to look like a success story—so much so that the federal monitor was getting ready to start winding down the consent decree. According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, OPD recently made progress on a data collection project that was considered “one of the last hurdles the department must clear before being freed from more than a decade of federal oversight.”

So, wait, was Whent pushed out because he had done something to violate the consent decree agreement?

No. According to the *Express*, it was because of something Robert Warshaw, the federal monitor, found out when he started investigating the case.

And how did that come about?

On March 23, U.S. District Judge Thelton Henderson, whom the *Express* calls “the ultimate authority overseeing the department’s federal reforms,” issued a court order calling for the OPD’s investigation to be handed over to the federal monitor’s office. In his order, the judge cited “irregularities” and procedural “violations” in the police department’s handling of the sexual misconduct allegations. From that point forward the federal monitor has been in charge of overseeing the investigation.

And what did the investigation turn up once it was under the federal monitor’s

jurisdiction?

Well, among other things, it was discovered that Whent's wife had been in touch with Celeste Guap on Facebook. Guap has since confirmed this, telling reporters that Julia Whent allegedly reached out to her in June 2015. Most important, Guap says she told the chief's wife about her relationship with O'Brien.

Wait, why would Whent's wife have been talking to Guap on Facebook?

Great question. We don't know.

OK. Did she tell her husband about what Guap had said to her?

We don't know that either.

Oof. Can we go back to O'Brien for a second? Earlier you said *his* wife, Irma Lopez, had died of an "apparent" suicide. Why did you hedge on that?

Because Lopez's family doesn't believe she really killed herself—they think O'Brien shot her.

Is there any evidence of that?

In addition to the bullet that killed her, there was an extra one discovered in the wall of the apartment Lopez shared with O'Brien.

OK ... so is the idea that O'Brien killed his wife because she found out about Guap?

Actually, no. There's no indication of that. And remember, Lopez died in June 2014. According to Guap, her relationship with O'Brien didn't start till the following February. Again, O'Brien's suicide note is not public, but the people who have seen it and spoken anonymously to news outlets about its contents have not said anything about O'Brien taking the blame for his wife's death.

Got it. So what is going to happen now? Has anyone been charged or fired?

Not yet. As mentioned above, two officers have resigned from the Oakland Police Department as a result of the sexual misconduct investigation, but that investigation is still ongoing. According to ABC7, there have also been investigations opened in at least six other area police departments. And according to the Bay Area News Group, the Alameda County District Attorney's Office is conducting an independent review of the misconduct allegations, as well as the deaths of O'Brien and his wife.

Screenshot via ABC

So we could still see firings and charges.

Yes. It's important to note, though, that only a few of the officers suspected of having sex with



Ben Fairrow.

Guap are alleged to have done so while she was underage.

Does that mean the rest are innocent of any crimes?

It does not necessarily mean that. For one thing, Guap told ABC7 that three officers paid her for sex, which is obviously a crime. But more important, Guap has said that every officer she slept with knew she was a sex worker, and according to federal law—namely, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act—a person who has sex with someone he knows

to be a prostitute can face criminal prosecution even if no money changes hands. As long as the sex worker receives something of value—including help of any kind—it counts as trafficking.

I guess that's where the whole “tipping her off to planned OPD sting operations” thing becomes a problem.

Yes. Also, in interviews, Guap has directly stated that her relationships with police officers were motivated at least in part by a desire for protection: “I think cops are fine,” she told the *Express*. “They’re cute and all, but it’s like one less officer that’s gonna arrest me.”

It sounds like it's going to take a long time for all this to get sorted out. What's the next step for OPD, in the meantime?

First, the department needs a chief. It's been operating under the city administrator—not a law enforcement official—since the resignation of Paul Figueroa.

More broadly, though, it seems likely that a) the federal government will keep OPD under the consent decree for longer than planned and b) there's going to be a serious reckoning with how the department does its hiring. To that end, the two civil rights lawyers who represented the plaintiffs in the “Rough Riders” scandal—Chanin and John Burris, both of whom have been intimately involved for years in efforts to reform OPD—said at a press conference last week that they are asking for the department's recruiting and training operations to be placed under federal receivership.

Anything else?

The city of Oakland has reportedly hired a private investigator to figure out who has been leaking information to the press. So at least we know that everyone's priorities are in the right place.

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