

MINNEAPOLIS

North Minneapolis police commander demoted after Christmas tree controversy

Removal comes in wake of racially insensitive decorations on precinct tree.

By **Liz Sawyer** (<https://www.startribune.com/liz-sawyer/6370533/>) and **Libor Jany** (<https://www.startribune.com/libor-jany/6134700/>) Star Tribune staff writers

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The commander of north Minneapolis' Fourth Police Precinct was demoted Monday after two officers decorated the precinct Christmas tree with racially offensive decorations.

Inspector Aaron Biard is being replaced by Assistant Chief Mike Kjos, who previously served as the precinct's commander and will take over day-to-day operations until a replacement is found.

The department has not named the officers involved, but several sources identified Mark Bohnsack and Brandy Steberg, both 21-year veterans, as the officers who decorated the Christmas tree inside the North Side precinct's lobby with the items. Both were placed on paid leave Friday, pending the outcome of an internal affairs investigation.

Bohnsack, 43, and Steberg, 47, decorated the tree with a pack of menthol cigarettes, a can of Steel Reserve malt liquor, police tape, a bag of Takis and a cup from Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen, according to the sources.

A photo of the tree surfaced on social media, triggering public outrage and prompting calls for the officers to be fired.

Attempts to reach the two officers on Monday were unsuccessful; several listed numbers for Bohnsack and Steberg were either disconnected or belonged to someone new.

Mayor Jacob Frey last week denounced the display as "racist" and "despicable," then called for the officers to be fired, before distancing himself from his earlier comments.

In a statement following Biard's demotion, Frey said he supported Chief Medaria Arradondo's decision, saying that it "reflects [Arradondo's] resolve to make meaningful change."

The incident drew [widespread public criticism](http://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-police-officer-will-be-fired-over-racist-christmas-tree-decorations/501646051/) (<http://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-police-officer-will-be-fired-over-racist-christmas-tree-decorations/501646051/>) the same day City Council voted to reduce the mayor's proposed police budget by \$1.1 million for 2019. It was largely viewed as a provocative insult aimed at African-Americans, marking another setback in the department's efforts to mend frayed relationships with black North Siders.

Though the officers' exact motives are unclear, department brass described the situation to city leaders as a "prank." Council Member Phillipe Cunningham later issued a sharply worded Facebook post aimed at those trying to downplay the decorations as a joke.

"These pieces of trash were deliberately chosen to represent how certain officers feel about the community they serve: that Black people are a stereotype to be mocked and the lives of those they serve may as well be reduced to trash in the gutter," he wrote.

"It's a racist prank," Cunningham later told the Star Tribune via text. "There's no other way to see it."



COURTESY MINNEAPOLIS POLICE

Aaron Biard

Police union President Lt. Bob Kroll did not respond to two messages left Monday seeking comment. He previously declined to comment, saying the investigation was in its preliminary stages.

Officers Bohnsack and Steberg each have a list of department commendations as well as numerous complaints. Between them, the officers have been cleared of wrongdoing by a grand jury in at least three separate fatal police shootings.

Since 2013, Bohnsack has been the subject of at least 12 complaints, including one open case, through the Office of Police Conduct Review. Though the files aren't public, none of the complaints resulted in disciplinary action from the civilian review board. In 2010, former Chief Tim Dolan reprimanded Bohnsack and another officer for requiring a couple in their 40s to hike up a freeway ramp after their car was impounded, although it's unclear whether either officer was disciplined.

Steberg was also named in two recent Office of Police Conduct Review complaints, in 2017 and 2018, but neither resulted in discipline.

Steberg, of Minneapolis, was also listed as a defendant in three federal court cases between 2008 and 2015 claiming excessive force. Two were dismissed and he won a third after a jury trial sided in his favor, court records show.

During that time, Steberg earned a slew of distinctions, including a Medal of Commendation and two letters of appreciation, a Medal of Honor, Lifesaving award and a Chief's Award of Merit. After he helped rescue six children from a burning residence in 2002, the Minnesota Police and Peace Officers Association named him officer of the year.

Two years later, Steberg earned additional praise for scaling an icy cliff without safety equipment to help save a suicidal man who'd driven off the ledge and had become precariously stuck in a tree halfway down. Bohnsack has also received several commendations, but details of them were not immediately available.

In a statement released last week, Arradondo said he was "ashamed and appalled" by the officers' actions. If Arradondo fires them, they can appeal through arbitration.

Biard was promoted in June 2017 to replace Kjos, under whom he served as a lieutenant. Biard's career has included stints in the training, traffic and sex crime units. An MPD veteran of 23-plus years, he was popular among officers and community members alike (<http://www.startribune.com/tough-road-ahead-for-new-north-minneapolis-police-commander/446596473/>), regularly turning up at public meetings and staying late to listen to residents air their grievances.

But department sources say concerns were raised about how he handled the tree incident, which happened earlier in the week, but wasn't addressed until several days later. He will return to his civil service rank of lieutenant and work in the traffic unit.

The demotion wasn't the only fallout. Chris House, the lieutenant in charge of the "daywatch," was also replaced, by the newly promoted Lt. Mark Montgomery, according to three sources with knowledge of the move.

Montgomery previously worked in the precinct as a sergeant before making lieutenant, while House's last assignment was as a supervisor downtown.

In a letter to his staff Friday, Arradondo reiterated how a singular act that erodes public trust would directly reflect on the entire department. "In these often challenging times our communities are looking towards us to be their beacon of hope that we, as peace officers, will serve in a manner that treats everyone with fairness, dignity and respect," he wrote. "That manner of treatment is nonnegotiable."

Liz Sawyer covers breaking news, crime and corrections for the Star Tribune. She previously wrote about suburban life in the south metro.

liz.sawyer@startribune.com 612-673-4648 bylizsawyer

Libor Jany is the Minneapolis crime reporter for the Star Tribune. He joined the newspaper in 2013, after stints in newsrooms in Connecticut, New Jersey, California and Mississippi. He spent his first year working out of the paper's Washington County bureau, focusing on transportation and education issues, before moving to the Dakota County team.

libor.jany@startribune.com 612-673-4064 StribJany