

Taking Back the Hood

Determined Wilhaggin resident instigates patrols

Inside Arden
January, 2009

By Duffy Kelly

Wilhaggin resident Krista Whitman was more than a little tired of waking up in the morning to find her car windows broken. Seven times in one year alone, vandals made their way to her Crondall Way house and shattered her windows. But that hardly compares to the day she left for the gym at 6 a.m. and returned home an hour later to find thieves had stolen her son's truck right from the driveway.

"These thieves are fast and efficient," Whitman says. "Crondall specifically has a lot of traffic because of its easy access to the river. We were experiencing a mini crime wave. Lots of broken car windows, home invasions, and they were pretty brazen operating in the daylight."

With grass-roots zeal and a determination to take back her neighborhood, Whitman took matters in her own hands. She started a Neighborhood Watch group that has



Krista Whitman was tired of broken car windows and decided it was time to do something about it. The Wilhaggin Neighborhood Association was the result.

since burgeoned into a high-tech, high-alert crime-stopping force that is putting the Mayberry back in Wilhaggin.

Two years ago, Whitman began holding neighborhood meetings at her home.

"That wasn't enough," she says. "So we ended up having a town hall meeting where 100 people showed up at the Arden Dimick Library, and it was unanimous that we wanted security, the sheriff's presence."

Heavily armed with volunteers, Whitman took her battle against crime door-to-door. Neighbors helped to create a nonprofit group, The Wilhaggin Neighborhood Association. In two months, the organization collected \$80,000, as well as the support of 310 households. It was enough money to hire an off-duty sheriff to patrol the area.

"Because we don't have a homeowners association, we can't require the payment of dues, so luckily we had some great volunteers and formed a nonprofit mutual benefit corporation. We hired the Sheriff's Department and walked door-to-door and talked to everybody we could to join our group," she says.

With the help of President Jeff Baldo, Vice President Geoff Margolis and Treasurer John Reilly, the group created a slick website complete with crime reports, statistics, classified ads, maps and photographs.

Using cell phones, websites and texting technology, the group took

a ~~citizen as~~ journalist approach to developing an accurate picture of the neighborhood and posting it on the Web.

“People had stopped reporting crimes before this,” Whitman says. “They didn’t call about vandalism and broken windows. Now our mission is to call in everything. We have a cell phone number where we can call the officer directly. We can post alerts on the website immediately. If your car gets egged, you post it so when the deputy goes on duty he can get on the website and see what’s going on immediately.”

The Wilhaggin neighborhood is composed of 650 homes between the American River on the south, Fair Oaks Boulevard on the north, the drainage basin at Wilhaggin and American River Drive, and the eastern edge of Rio Americano High School. The association collects \$275 per household per year from

about half of the area’s residents. It contracts six patrol shifts per week.

“I think the general sense is that we have fewer unwanted elements in the neighborhood,” Whitman says. “The sheriff has provided a definite presence. When we have had disturbances, arrests have been made. They are pretty visible out there.”

Although technology is criticized for keeping neighbors indoors, locked to the computer keyboards and away from face-to-face communications, in the case of the Wilhaggin Neighborhood Association, technology is helping bring the neighborhood together. Like the town crier, the website is a high-tech coffee klatch, without the coffee, that keeps neighbors informed.

Take, for instance, the recent entry by a contracted sheriff on duty.

“Last night at about 2:15 a.m. I saw a suspicious vehicle parked right behind a resident’s vehicle on Estates between Crondall and American River

Drive,” the Web posting reads. “He had an empty backpack and burglary tools on the floorboard of his truck. He was on probation and had prior arrests for theft. I found narcotics in his wallet and his truck had expired registration since last May.”

Visitors to the website can get a brief description of the incident reports such as that one, but for the rest of the story, become a member, Whitman says.

“I love my neighborhood and really didn’t want to move,” she says, “but I was beginning to feel like that was my only option. With the association, it’s literally like taking your neighborhood back.”

For more information or to join the association, call 541-0538 or go to Wilhagginna.com.

Duffy Kelly can be reached at DuffyKelly@comcast.net or through her website at DuffyKelly.com. ●