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Neighborhoods: Fighting Drugs on the Home Front

By Jill Lingwall

Last summer, crack dealing in Doloros Thomas' neighborhood reached an all time high. Drug activity had become so rampant, Thomas' friends and family were afraid to visit. Dealers, users and prostitutes literally blocked the street.

Neila Seaman, a young mother living in the same neighborhood, found condom wrappers in the playground of her kindergartner's school. Dealers solicited crack in an empty lot across from the elementary building.

Neva Jorgensen, a mother of five, watched dealers openly selling crack cocaine from cars, front porches and sidewalks in her neighborhood. As many as 10 prostitutes at a time stood on the street as an onslaught of "Johns" constantly cruised by. She said residents needed combat boots to live in the neighborhood.

These three women lived in the same area on Des Moines' near North side. They became united in a struggle against a problem that had infested homes, parks and people all around them. The cloud of the drug scourge no longer just affected the junkies. It was threatening the lives of innocent, law abiding residents and their children.

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Seaman, Jorgensen, Thomas and other residents contacted Chief Moulder. Moulder, Captain Bill Mc Carthy, County Attorney Jim Smith, City Councilman Tom Vlassis and Representative Gary Sherzan met with Seaman and Thomas. They pinpointed the area around the neighborhood elementary school as a place that needed immediate concern. In the Fall, Moulton elementary organized its first Parent/Teacher Association. Neila Seaman became president.

"Our P.T.A. is unique in that our main concern is parents finding resources in the community. Many of these people have had very little political influence. We wanted to educate people about what was available," she said.

Educating people about what was available also became a priority for Chief Moulder. The police department was implementing a four-pronged "municipal approach" to combat drugs through prevention/education, treatment, enforcement and community involvement.

"The idea of the municipal approach is to develop an attack on the problem by expanding resources beyond the police department," Moulder said. "An integral part of that is getting people to work together. It benefits both the department and the community."

He said, "Any group we could get together , we would ask what area they wanted to target and we'd help them put together resources. We wanted them to narrow down the problem to a specific area that could be handled, instead of just talking about bigger issues, like prison overcrowding." Moulder said this interaction quickly shifted many individuals' attitudes' from "confrontational to cooperative."

Doloros Thomas, Neila Seaman and Neva Jorgensen decided they would not sit back and let drug dealers make them prisoners in their homes. These three women, along with the Des Moines police, neighbors, city officials and other concerned citizens, waged their own war on drugs, right in their own neighborhood.

Every day last summer, Thomas kept a diary. "I look back at my diary now and say, how did we survive this?...You would have been afraid to drive down this street a year ago," she said.

Seaman said the introduction of crack into the Des Moines drug market ignited the problem. Jorgensen said she agreed, "Drug activity got out of hand. The dealers thought they could just run us back into our homes and we would hide and not fight back."

Other concerned neighbors had organized into groups like the River Bend Neighborhood Association. These residents wanted action, but they did not know what direction to take. This desire for action by the neighbors was the catalyst Des Moines Police Chief William Moulder had been looking for.

Chief Moulder had been working with the Black Ministerial Alliance and other agencies to increase public awareness. A group from Des Moines had travelled to Washington, D.C. on a trip called "One by One", designed to give the message that drugs were affecting the heartland. The police department and agencies had also organized marches in areas like the Homes of Oakridge, a public housing facility. The success in these areas gave some neighborhood residents hope.

"Oakridge, Drake Park and other areas had gotten rid of drugs, why couldn't we?" Seaman said.

"I credit Moulder for everything that happened," Seaman said. "If we hadn't talked to him, we'd be floundering. He really helped us to organize."

Jorgensen said her attitude toward the police department has turned completely around. "Before Moulder got here, I would have said I'd almost rather shoot the police than the drug dealers. Chief Moulder has turned that around. He has really good people working for him, too. Through the neighborhood associations, we've been able to learn what police limitations and expectations are."

Moulder said he and the department were simply helping people understand how they could help themselves. "We told the groups, 'we can't solve your problems, but we'll help you find solutions,'" he said.

Finding solutions helped individuals feel empowered. Moulder said, "I think this really gives the neighborhoods a feeling of ownership. It is something they can do on their own. They have made a difference. The more powerful they feel, the more powerful they are, and the more formidable they are against the 'bad guys.'"

The municipal approach, or community policing strategy, proved successful in some significant ways. Residents helped play a key role in closing a bar that had created much of the drug trafficking and prostitution in the River Bend Neighborhood Association area.

Neighbors began writing down the license numbers of cars seen picking up prostitutes. They sent out letters addressed to the "johns" and their wives, stating ". . . we hope you realize. .

you risk criminal prosecution, as well as exposing yourself--and possibly your family to public humiliation and a host of diseases, including the deadly AIDS virus."

The Moulton Elementary P.T.A. had a fence put up around the lot drug dealers were using across from the school. Neighbors put up no trespassing signs, boarded up abandoned homes and organized marches.

Helen Martin and others living around Des Moines' Drake Park lobbied for no parking signs around the park and encouraged families to start using the park for recreation. "We believe there's power in getting out and letting them [the drug dealers] know we're here. It makes them uneasy," she said.

"I think the drug dealers and men picking up prostitutes thought I was a harmless gray-haired lady... but little did they know I was copying down their license plate numbers," Thomas said.

Julie Andersen, of the Citizens for Community Improvement, said the police/community cooperation gave the neighborhoods access to community leaders. "When the Chief comes to meetings, people see how accessible the police are," she said. "They feel like they really have an ear. It makes it easier for them to want to help."

In most cases, the neighborhood groups got to know their patrol officers and began calling more often to report activity they noticed. Seaman said prior to the neighborhood associations, people thought all drug fighting "was the police's job."

She said, "Now, it makes sense to realize the police can't

be everywhere at once. They need the eyes and ears of the community to help them."

"This cooperation has allowed us to do things like videotaping to identify drug transactions from neighborhood residences. With 3200 people involved in the Neighborhood Associations, it's like having that many more eyes and ears for the police department," Sergeant Russ Underwood, a member of the Mayor's Select Committee on Drug Abuse, said.

Moulder and Pete Rounds, the Lieutenant commanding the Vice/Narcotics Control Unit, agreed. "I think the neighborhood groups are the key to the overall solution to the drug abuse problem," Lt. Rounds said. "Law enforcement is an important part, but it's not the only way. More is needed because we're just being reactive with only law enforcement. We need to be proactive to get things done."

Moulder said community involvement helps the police department and city officials understand the concerns that really affect the citizens. "We don't have to just guess what we think the problems are and flounder until we hit the key ones," he said.

The police department, through the support of City Manager Cy Carney, made a serious commitment to community policing with the implementation of a full-time neighborhood association coordinator. Sergeant Larry Cramer took on the position and became a liaison between the police department and the over 35 neighborhood groups.

"Larry Cramer has been wonderful," Lynn Stamus of the

Westchester Neighborhood Association said. "People in the neighborhood feel like the police are available now."

Cramer said having the position of neighborhood coordinator allows people to have a direct contact into the police department. "I think the neighborhood groups really feel like they have a friend in the police department," he said. "This helps them understand we care about and share some of the same concerns they have."

Sergeant Cramer, other officers, representatives from the United Way and neighborhood residents put together a community handbook designed to be a resource book for the neighborhood groups. The book contains everything from sample "Dear Johns" letters to details on programs like "Operation Eraser", a graffiti cleaning project. The book is used by new groups and currently active groups.

The drug problem still exists in Des Moines. Both the police department and neighborhood groups agree there is still work to be done.

But, most also agree that through the joint efforts of the community and the department, law-abiding citizens are back on the streets, and in the parks and sending their children out to the playgrounds.

Carpenter Neighbors Association leader Joe Schaefer summed up his sentiments. "We're standing up to let the dealers know we won't just sit here and be victimized. We will make a difference."

And they have.