"Hey baby, lookin' for a date?"

Under a street light on El Cajon Boulevard near 50th Street on a cold and foggy winter night, a blond woman in jeans, a Chargers sweat shirt and tennis shoes called out to two men in a Nissan Maxima.

She and her partner, a brunette in jeans and a brown jacket, gushed over the men's car and stereo. The blond woman began dancing provocatively.

Before settling on a price for sex, the women assured the men that they weren't undercover police officers.

As the happy foursome made its way into a motel room, one of the women twisted the door handle and wham -- like a cobra striking its prey -- five big cops in bright yellow jackets swooped down. "San Diego police! You're under arrest!"

This gritty stretch of City Heights has long been a haven for the world's oldest profession. Residents find used condoms and have to shield their children from people having sex in cars, on sidewalks and in yards. And mothers walking to meet their children at school or a recreation center tell of being routinely propositioned.

Last year, residents, police and attorneys for the city of San Diego decided to crack down on streetwalking by using a crime-fighting technique known as problem-oriented policing.

In some neighborhoods, police and residents have united to slow speeding drivers and solve a string of burglaries. City Heights' prostitution problem is among the most vexing issues tackled since the department embraced problem-oriented policing in 1988.

The result has been a greater number of prostitution sweeps, including some along streets that police had not targeted before.

The effort is paying off, said Theresa Quiroz, who has lived in City Heights for 13 years and is one of two dozen members of the Prostitution Task Force. Before a spotlight was shed on the problem, Quiroz said, she got four, maybe five, propositions a week. Now she gets about one.

Once she was walking along Fairmount Avenue to pick up her children at a recreation center when a well-dressed man in a minivan approached.
"Are you working today?" he asked, using street slang to ask if she was a prostitute.

Quiroz said she was wearing a sweater, jeans and walking shoes, hardly what she considered provocative clothing.

"As a community, every woman is impacted," Quiroz told other task force members during a recent gathering. "It's very dangerous for young children -- especially for 14- to 15-year-old girls. Someone approaches them and says: 'How would you like to make a quick 200 bucks?'"

The task force meets monthly at a police storefront on University Avenue, bringing together people who live and work in City Heights, former prostitutes and johns, police officers, deputy city attorneys and social workers. The former prostitutes and johns were invited by the City Attorney's Office to offer their perspectives.

No suggestion is off-limits. At one recent gathering, task force members weighed the merits of requiring convicted johns to attend public meetings to talk about the effect prostitution has on City Heights. The approach has been used in other cities.

The group decided it would be appropriate to include the men if they didn't have violent or serious criminal histories. One woman cautioned against publicly humiliating the men.

"The johns have dehumanized the women," she said, "but you won't get anywhere if we dehumanize the johns."

Assistant Police Chief Rulette Armstead, who oversees the Mid-City area and programs including vice and sex crimes, said the key to problem-oriented policing is to teach residents to get help.

"A large part of (our) job," Armstead said, "is to train and teach people in the community about how to obtain resources for the neighborhoods. And how to begin fighting crime by using environmental design, such as better lighting, remodeling parking lots or picking up litter."

For example, to cut back on illegal drug activity, she said, the department has entered into pacts with store owners not to sell drug paraphernalia in return for police agreeing to enforce anti-loitering laws.

"It's about changing community attitudes," Armstead said, "and getting the community to a partner with us."

Prostitution isn't the only problem that police and residents have joined forces on in City Heights. They also teamed up to wipe out graffiti that had spread far and wide.

Graffiti throughout the neighborhood reportedly was reduced by 90 percent over 1 1/2...
years. The effort earned the police department a Herman Goldstein Award for Excellence in Problem Solving in December from the Police Executive Research Foundation in Washington, D.C.

Officer David Toss, who along with Officer Corinne Hard coordinated the anti-graffiti project, said problem-oriented policing starts with identifying a problem. Next come suggesting solutions, followed by attacking the problem and then analyzing the results.

"It's like a weed, man," Toss explained. "If you just cut the top off, it'll grow back. You have to tackle the root."

The anti-graffiti push included bringing together 10 youths convicted of tagging in City Heights and asking them what motivated them to deface other people's property. Officers monitored the youths and not one was rearrested.

Twice a month, juvenile law breakers painted over graffiti in alleys, and on public buildings and businesses within a day of the vandalism.

And two youth programs were formed. Junior high students painted seven murals on what had been the most heavily tagged walls. Since then, Toss said, the walls have stayed clean because in the tagging culture murals are respected as art.

And a youth bicycle team called Kids in Control continues to help police monitor graffiti problems in areas hard to view from patrol cars.

Tackling prostitution

Flush from the victory over graffiti, City Heights residents, police and the City Attorney's Office decided to take on prostitution.

Last year, about 600 people were arrested for buying or selling sex in San Diego. About 20 percent of the arrests were in City Heights.

One of the more colorful members of the prostitution task force, Leighanna Crandall, a stout, red-haired mother of two, said she has had to shield her children from the sight of people having sex in cars in a parking lot near their apartment. And she has been angered and humiliated by being propositioned while walking down the street.

Crandall carries a 5-foot wooden cane with a carving of a coiled serpent, wears flowery white dresses and goes by the name "Momma Moses."

"Even with my staff, I get approached," she said. "It's not how you're dressed. ... It makes you feel cheap."

Crandall believes strongly that police need to keep the heat on men who solicit sex.
The task force has been lobbying to bring the region’s first community court to City Heights and other Mid-City neighborhoods, possibly by next year. If that happens, the pressure on johns and prostitutes will heighten.

The city received a $225,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Justice to plan for a community court to handle only misdemeanor crimes, such as prostitution, low-level drug offenses, vandalism and graffiti.

Community courts are presided over by a judge or court-appointed commissioner and have been set up in five states. The first community court opened in midtown Manhattan in 1993 and was credited with reducing prostitution by more than 60 percent in two years.

These courts are intended to reduce the types of crime that hurt everyday life in a neighborhood. As part of their punishment, some courts require offenders to sit on a panel for a day with neighborhood residents to discuss how their crime affected that community. That’s an approach that appeals to the task force in City Heights.

Justice department officials say the courts help hold offenders accountable to the community. Offenders can also be ordered to perform community service, such as picking up trash, painting over graffiti or planting trees, as well as being ordered to participate in drug and alcohol rehabilitation, job training and other rehabilitation programs.

In the meantime, San Diego police have continued setting up undercover stings to arrest johns and prostitutes. And although police used to just write citations for prostitution, everyone arrested now is booked into County Jail and any cars involved are impounded. During a sweep in City Heights in December, 25 men were arrested and 19 vehicles were impounded.

People convicted of selling or soliciting sex for the first time are usually fined about $500, put on probation for three years, ordered to take an AIDS counseling class and directed to stay away from the neighborhood where they were arrested during certain times of day. The cost to recover an impounded vehicle is about $250.

Chandani Flinn, the deputy city prosecutor who leads the City Heights task force, is encouraged by the results so far, but she’s realistic about what the task force can do.

"You’re not going to stop prostitution," Flinn said. "The best you can hope for is to help people understand the complexity of the problem and to figure out what roles they can play to help diminish it."

Caption: 5 PICS 2 CHARTS
1. San Diego police Officer Ken Kries (right) handcuffed a man suspected of soliciting prostitution on El Cajon Boulevard. The vice officers, who asked that their faces not be photographed, were assisted by beat officers from the Mid-city division. 2. Mid-City
police Officer David Tos rode alongside Sessy Enriquez at the end of a check of potential trouble spots in the community. 3. San Diego police arrested a woman on El Cajon Boulevard. She allegedly offered sex for money to an undercover officer. With problem-oriented policing, officers and residents team to improve the community. (B-3).

4. Teens painted over graffiti in an alley as part of their community service. The first target of City Heights’ problem-oriented was graffiti. (B-3).

5. Community Solutions. (B-3).


7. About U-T solutions (A-1) 1,2,3,6. Peggy Peattie / Union-Tribune photos

Memo: For charts see microfilm.

Edition: 1,2,3
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