Azalea Park residents tackle problems; From graffiti to expired baby food, they aren't afraid to take action when needed

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For Tom Lashbrook, it was the garbage. He continually complained about the Dumpsters, full of trash, lids wide open. He hated, too, the fact that transients camped in the parking lot.

For Linda Pennington, it was the graffiti. She would paint it out herself, sick of seeing it mar the walls day after day.

For Thom Turner, it was the drunks who hung around and made residents afraid to go into the stores.

But for many of the people in Azalea Park, a community of 1,300 homes in City Heights, it was the baby food that really got things stirred up.

They charge that four stores in their neighborhood, all owned by Bob and David Kachi, were selling expired baby food and infant formula more than two years past its shelf life.

"The stores were abysmal," said Turner, president of the Azalea Park Neighborhood Association. "Drunk people on the property and graffiti were the biggest problems."

And so, residents here did what comes naturally to them.

They got together and worked to fix the problems.

First, they called the store owners, then police and code enforcement, the health department and the media. Still unsatisfied, they sat down for a mediation session this week with the Kachi brothers and gave them a list of "requests for improvements."

The list asked for the immediate removal of graffiti and for clerks not to sell liquor to drunk people. It asked that they check products for freshness and expiration dates and add a fence and better lighting.

The Kachi brothers -- owners of El General Store, The General Store, Maddox Liquor and Texaco, all on Poplar Street and Fairmount Avenue -- agreed to all the requests. And more, they agreed to attend the monthly meetings of the neighborhood association.

"We are going to start a new page here," said Bob Kachi, who has owned three of the stores with his brother since 1985. "We spend more hours a day here than in our own
homes. My business depends on the community."

Bob Kachi said he will check for graffiti several times a week and clean up the trash every day. He said the expired baby food was an oversight, old stock left over from when they purchased their most recent store less than two years ago.

"I thought we were doing a good job," he said. "Now, I need to pay more attention. I was kind of surprised, but sometimes when you are so busy running your business, you don't see what the concerns are."

Despite the Kachi brothers' willingness to talk, residents fear things may not change.

On the day of the mediation, even after two local news stations did hidden-camera exposes revealing the expired baby food for sale, even after several people went in and bought the food undercover, Enfamil infant formula two years past its expiration date still sat on the shelves.

Keeping an eye on these stores is only one of numerous things this neighborhood does to make Azalea Park a better place to live.

The neighborhood, once run-down, is now full of beautiful gardens and lush canyons. Dilapidated houses are being refurbished. Residents are running out drug dealers by documenting activity and writing down license plates, information they turn over to police.

The community also does animal rescue, working with a local group to provide low-cost spaying and neutering of pets and finding homes for strays.

And they tackle graffiti.

Just a few minutes after this week's mediation meeting with the Kachi brothers, resident Lori Taylor had a brush in hand and was painting out graffiti on a wall behind the park for which the community is named.

Residents each have a section of the neighborhood to watch out for and paint as soon as graffiti appears.

They clean out canyons to prevent fire danger and encourage the homeless to move on. They plant trees and bushes.

Hand-painted signs of violets or clovers or tulips hang on each street, identifying the various roads named after flowers.

They have paint-outs and cleanups, parties and Cinco de Mayo celebrations and even an informal Welcome Wagon.
"When new neighbors arrive, we'll have 30 people show up to welcome them and help
them move in," Turner said.

Azalea Park received national attention about 10 years ago when some residents
started actively recruiting gays and lesbians to live in their community.

They started in 1993 with a float in the Gay Pride parade and a booth offering
information on homes for sale and rent in the community. Because of these efforts,
Pennington says, 110 renters and homeowners have moved into the neighborhood.

All of this activity has created a community that many say is like a family. Their Web
page has pictures of parties and street fairs, birthdays, anniversaries, baby showers,
house warmings. Even the local police are proud of the neighborhood.

"The group is zealous and they get things done," said Officer Jim Tulumello, the
community relations officer who works with Azalea Park. "They turn off that TV and they
roll up their sleeves, and that's what we need more of."

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Caption: 2 PICS
1. Following an Azalea Park meeting, homeowner Tom Lashbrook (center) had a
friendly discussion with store owners Bob Kachi (left) and David Kachi about graffiti.
(Eds. 1,2,7) 2. Less than 15 minutes after an Azalea Park community meeting, Lori
Taylor was busy painting out graffiti on a wall near the community's recreation center.
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