School's playground suffers steady attack; Trash, graffiti plague City Heights campus

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The little playground at Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School seems like a battleground on some mornings.

Two months ago, someone took a hacksaw to the metal bars, leaving the tool and debris behind.

Playground equipment is covered with graffiti, and people have started fires on it, or in the wood chips underneath.

And trash, from shattered liquor bottles to used condoms to a marijuana pipe, have been left on the grounds.

Principal Christine Haddad knows there are bigger problems in her City Heights neighborhood. But Haddad worries about keeping her children safe and maintaining the playground, which is open to the community when school is out.

"Our concern is, once this playground is destroyed, I can't replace it," she said.

The school's first playground, a simple structure that Haddad called "Mickey Mouse," was built about 11 years ago. It got a major makeover five years ago, thanks to a grant from Ronald McDonald Charities.

Haddad, who has been principal for two years, said she did not know the amount of the grant, which required that the playground be accessible to the public.

A sign posted at one of the entry gates states that the playground is open 3 p.m. to sunset on school days and from 7 a.m. to sunset weekends and holidays. However, the playground is always accessible via a parking lot for a nearby senior complex.

Haddad said there is no money to replace damaged equipment. There are nubs where the bars were sawed off, and graffiti remains despite attempts to remove it.

The Catholic school needed a decade of bake sales and other fundraisers to get the $8,000 to buy preschool playground equipment next to the existing site. The school still lacks money to have it installed.

Past experience has school officials concerned about their preschool plans.

"We're very nervous about it," Haddad said.

The 187 students, from preschool to eighth grade, use the existing playground during the

day, and they notice or stumble across things that shouldn't be there.

A few weeks ago, a student found a marijuana pipe buried in the woodchips that cover the playground floor. He gave the pipe to his mother, who brought it back to the school.

Doung Nguyen said he remembers the playground at Our Lady of the Sacred Heart being vandalized almost as soon as it opened. The 15-year-old boy attended the school until last year.

Doung said he saw people urinating down the slide and taggers spray-painting equipment. He once found a pocket knife left on the grounds.

He also remembers a homeless man who often slept under one of the play sets.

"I saw him last night," Doung said one recent Saturday evening.

Doung was at the playground with friends waiting for their Saturday school to begin. The playground was alive with children climbing on the equipment and a few playing football in the parking lot.

Late last month, Haddad took her concerns to a community meeting with San Diego Police Chief William Lansdowne and Deputy Mayor Toni Atkins, whose City Council district includes parts of City Heights.

Police Capt. Bob Kanaski, commander of the Mid-City Division, said he plans to meet with Haddad. Kanaski said police haven't received many calls for that location, probably because damage is done at night.

"During the day, it seems to be pretty good," he said.

The primary problem in that area is gang-related violence, Kanaski said.

Kanaski said he is working with the San Diego Organizing Project, a faith-based community organization, to have regular meetings with the community and police officers. He said the meetings would be held at Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Church, which draws many from City Heights.

Haddad said she doesn't know why her school's playground gets battered. The larger Teralta Park a few blocks away at Orange Avenue and 40th Street doesn't have the same problems.

Although some playground equipment and light fixtures at Teralta Park have been vandalized by taggers, litter isn't a serious problem, said Sergio Munoz of the Park and Recreation Department.

"It's small things," Munoz said as he picked up ice cream and candy wrappers and empty soda bottles.

A few weeks ago someone apparently tried to set fire to a pile of clothes, Munoz said.

Haddad said in the past few weeks people have been setting fires at the school's playground, too. She has found piles of burned wood chips and charred paper.

To ensure her children's safety, she and other school officials do an early-morning sweep with rakes and buckets.

"We do it every (school) day," said Robert Seneff, who is in charge of the before-and-after-school program.

Seneff arrives about 5:30 a.m. and often tells the homeless man to leave before the children get there. Seneff said he sometimes calls the police, but the man leaves before officers arrive.

It wouldn't be so bad, Seneff said, except he thinks the man urinates on the playground and sometimes leaves behind a blanket.

On Monday morning, Seneff and Haddad picked up wrappers and other trash. There was some charred paper buried under piles of wood chips, as if someone had try to set a fire.

"For a Monday, it's not so bad," Seneff said.

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Caption: 3 PICS
1. Robert Seneff, who runs the before- and- after-school program at Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School, raked trash Monday from the wood chips used as ground cover on the playground. Seneff often arrives to find a homeless man sleeping at the playground. 2. Principal Christine Haddad finds everything from wrappers to broken liquor bottles at her City Heights school. 3. Robert Seneff of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School crawled into a piece of elevated playground equipment Monday morning to check for trash and damage. Much of the equipment is marred by graffiti, which school officials have found difficult to remove. (Ed. 1) 1,2,3. John R. McCutchen / Union-Tribune photos

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