Neighborhood angels: Men in recovery help neighbors reclaim their community

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Every morning, two motley crews -- all men -- march out of a former convent on a serene residential block near the hub of City Heights.

Moving in opposite directions, the groups silently circle the foursquare area bounded by 42nd Street and Marlborough, Orange and Polk avenues.

They touch the four corners, at which stand Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Catholic Church, a seniors' high-rise, the church's elementary school and a small, fenced playground.

Like guardian angels, they remain ever ready to assist any school kid or senior they see in need.

And on days when the work is needed, they also stop to clean trash from side streets and alleys along the way.

"They're sort of a fact of life around here," says Sister Linda Lutz, principal at Our Lady of the Sacred Heart elementary school. "They've turned out to be a great benefit to the school and the church."

The jaunt, which takes more than 800 steps and several minutes to complete, is part of a residential treatment program that for 11 years has reclaimed souls by the thousands and helped bring serenity to a neighborhood once gripped by crime.

The 60-day CRASH program houses up to 50 men at a time who come, either voluntarily or by court order, seeking recovery.

A three-decade-old county-funded service organization, CRASH (Community Resources And Self Help) is built on the premise that being a contributing part of society while in recovery can help even the most hopelessly lost find home.

Most of the 4,300 who've come through on no-nonsense Mary Ann Hayden's watch since 1989 have walked away from drugs and alcohol.

"We're a recovery program that works," she says. "We get men from all walks and all ages (from 18). And you can see it in their eyes that they just want someone to break through their defense and help them find the way.

"And I like the tough ones because the same tenacity they use in surviving out there is
the same force that makes them stick to recovery."

From 7:30 a.m. until lights out at 11 p.m., the men at the house participate in a regimented schedule of activities, including the walks and group and individual counseling sessions.

Anti-drug rules and adherence to 12-step principles are strictly enforced by Hayden, her staff of eight and the members of the house themselves. Punishment for violators is always decided by the entire house.

And house rules make working together to complete household chores and outside community service projects prerequisites for passing through phases in recovery.

"It's like a family here," says Hayden.

A grandmother, at 58, Hayden is transplanted from the bayou state of Louisiana and has worked most of her adult life in rehabilitation and recovery -- the last 11 years with CRASH.

And having survived two former alcoholic husbands, a former boyfriend with a compulsive-gambling habit, and the trials of raising six kids, all with drug issues at various times, Hayden wholeheartedly espouses the organization's philosophy.

No one, however, mistakes her gentle, caring manner for weakness.

"She's everybody's mother -- but a mother who you can't push around," says Our Lady of the Sacred Heart's pastor Father Richard Perozich, himself a feisty community activist.

**Team effort**

Perozich and Hayden fell into a kind of unspoken mutual cooperation agreement five years ago.

That was soon after he took over the poor, struggling multiethnic parish, while declaring: "I'm going to fix this place up and I'm going to make it as comfortable as possible."

Now many say that the team of the church and the recovery program is most responsible for making the four-corner piece of the parish an oasis where the most commotion these days seems to come only from the ringing church bell.

"Junkies and other users don't like to see us coming," says former house resident Bob West, who now serves as president of the program's board of directors. "They know that we're in recovery and they know that we can tell that they're using.

"It plays on their (guilt) -- it's like they're being busted. And they don't like to stay
around."

To be sure, in 1989, when CRASH moved into the neighborhood, crack houses, drug dealers, addicts, prostitutes and warring gangs predominated.

And law-abiding residents lived in constant fear.

Gunfire in the area surrounding the church was commonplace. Bullets even occasionally struck outside walls and smashed through apartment windows, for example, at Guadalupe Plaza, the seniors' high-rise.

Over the years, a few Guadalupe residents were mugged and robbed on the sidewalks right outside the building. And young students at nearby Our Lady of the Sacred Heart often reported being threatened by thugs of varying ages.

Consequently, at first, residents of the high-rise were adamantly opposed when they learned that the church would allow what seemed an army of recovering drug and alcohol abusers to move into their back yard -- literally.

The seniors' high-rise is separated from the rear of the former convent by a single weathered redwood fence.

But it didn't take long for opinions to change.

"I thought (the recovery program) just wouldn't fit in next to a school and a senior citizens' project," says Jim Farra, resident maintenance supervisor and former manager of Guadalupe. "But almost right away, you could see that those men have structure. They're well-mannered and, basically, good people.

"They help keep the area nice and we remain extremely glad they're here."

Adds 87-year-old Mary Sanders, who has lived in the area for 25 years and was one of the first to move into Guadalupe Plaza when it opened in 1982: "I don't think many elderly people even realize how really bad it was around here. But because of the (program), I really love it here now -- this is the happiest I've been living here."

"Having these men make positive contributions to the neighborhood was good for them and good for the people around them," says Hayden. "It showed everyone that we are an asset to the community."

The neighborhood's good fortune multiplied, too, soon after residents began connecting a noticeable drop in crime with the presence of CRASH and its men on the streets.

"I live near here, right in the parish, and you could definitely see the change," says psychologist and inveterate politician Zane Horace Grey, who serves as vice president of the City Heights Town Council and also volunteers with CRASH.
He and others say inhabitants of houses where drug activity was known to occur began moving out; more law-abiding families and individuals moved in. Prostitutes, junkies and other vagrants began disappearing from the streets.

And then the 49-year-old Perozich arrived by way of parishes in San Ysidro and El Centro.

He immediately began preaching to parishioners about deterring crime by getting more personally involved in Neighborhood Watch activities.

The priest began encouraging them to do more, like reporting crimes and supporting the programs of a nearby new police substation and other community organizations.

And Hayden says she knew that she and "Father Richard," as she calls him, would work well together when, on his first Christmas in the parish, he came bearing gifts for all the men in the CRASH house.

"He and I are both hands-on, so we work very well together," she says. "He comes over here and takes an active role with the men and shows that he understands the important part recovery programs play in the lives of people battling addictions."

Before anyone realized, she says, the mutual agreement was struck and it has worked well ever since.

Perozich makes himself available to provide spiritual guidance at any time for any of Hayden's CRASH charges.

His maintenance supervisor, Joe Serrano, daily employs volunteers from the house in various parish projects, such as painting the school and keeping the church grounds immaculate and green.

Serrano, also 49, assumes a role of more than a boss and a job trainer. He recently lost a brother who struggled for years with a drug addiction before it finally killed him.

Other community organizations, through the City Heights Neighborhood Alliance, also have alliances with CRASH and provide service opportunities for Hayden's charges.

"One day we helped clean up four or five long, trash-filled alleys, and I felt good about myself," says John Ortiz, one of the men in recovery, who had spent half his 30 years abusing alcohol and drugs. "I never had any values in my life . . . But (now) we were out helping the community."

West, who has seen the effect of the CRASH program from both sides of its front door, finds the program most inspiring.
The former professional football player beat a 24-year addiction to alcohol and other drugs when he went through the program in 1996.

Now he says it's his turn to reciprocate.

"I owe so much to this program that I had to come back and do whatever I can to help," he says. "When I first walked through those doors, I was confused and spiritually dead.

"But they helped me change, get out of the streets and get back with my family."

It's all truly good for the community, Father Perozich emphasizes.

"The only way to describe what we have going here is to say that it's a gift."

Caption: 4 PICS
1,2. Manuel Sandoval, working on the roof of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart elementary school, helps the community while helping himself as part of the CRASH program. The residential treatment program also includes classes, like the basic math one shown below. 3. CRASH participants gather around Ken Quarles as he reads the "attaboys" for jobs well done. They will then break off for classes, job hunting, counseling or chores. 4, Father Richard Perozich, pastor of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, is a strong supporter of CRASH. (E-5) 1,2,3,4. Roni Galgano / Union-Tribune photos

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