Azalea Park sets a solid example
San Diego Union-Tribune - Friday, February 25, 1994
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The problems in the Azalea Park neighborhood grew slowly, residents say, like a cancer.

Over the past few years, trash piled up in the canyons that snake behind homes. Cryptic letters of gang graffiti became part of the landscape. Drug dealing flourished on a few street corners and in some houses. Burglaries were becoming increasingly common.

"The neighborhood was going downhill," said Greg Wilkerson, 33, a lifelong resident of the half-square-mile community in south City Heights flanked by Interstate 805 and Fairmount Avenue.

Then about five months ago, the middle-class neighborhood changed again -- for the better.

Wilkerson and dozens of other area residents formed the Azalea Park Neighborhood Association and began meeting with police to talk about crime and how to curb it.

Acting on tips from association members, police arrested more than 40 people in about a dozen homes on assorted drug charges. Groups of residents painted over new graffiti in the neighborhood almost as quickly as it appeared. Volunteer clean-up crews swept through canyons. Violent crimes and property crimes fell 11 percent since the association formed, and police credit the group as a factor.

"If neighbors get together and say we're not going to put up with this anymore, things can change," said association member Debra Rouelle, a 34-year-old mother of a young boy, who last year was on the verge of selling her home and moving away from Azalea Park.

Sure, residents say, the neighborhood still has its problems. But police say the association is an example of how a stable partnership between police and citizens can turn an area around.

And at a time when police say they have more work to do and less time to do it, such associations sometimes alert beat cops to problems that they might not detect otherwise.

"I could drive by a drug house 10 times a day" without noticing any suspicious activity "because when they see my car coming they can hide," said San Diego Police Officer Randy Aldredge, referring to the black-and-white cruiser he drives through the community's winding streets.

The head of the Azalea Park association is Ed Posner, a New York City transplant with a succinct message about the group's goals: "The bottom line is to keep the crap out of the neighborhood."

"It's time to take back the streets," said Posner, who led a tenants association to combat drug sales and prostitution when he lived in Manhattan.

"I want people to get off their duffs and do something," said Posner, 41.

Posner, a general contractor who works out of his Violet Street home, said attendance at the
monthly Azalea Park meetings has increased to 70 people. Encouraged by the participation in his own neighborhood, Posner said he wants to start similar associations in nearby City Heights communities around Hollywood Park and Hamilton Elementary School.

So far, he has enlisted the help of a few people like Felix Corona, who lives with his wife and 1-year-old son in an apartment near Hamilton Elementary. For the past few weeks, Corona has led his neighbors in painting over graffiti and picking up trash in a nearby canyon on weekends.

But thus far, Posner said, it has been a tough job trying to spread the fight-back-against-crime gospel beyond Azalea Park, which has a base of homeowners who tend to stay put for several years. In contrast, many nearby areas of City Heights are comprised largely of apartments whose residents are more transitory.

Posner has tried to drum up support by passing out fliers about upcoming meetings or by driving around in his 1988 Ford pickup truck and talking with residents.

He said it is important for apartment residents to form associations not only to combat crime but to improve living conditions.

An apartment on 44th Street south of Hamilton Elementary illustrates the type of conditions Posner said he wants to fight. On a recent weekday, trash was overflowing from a trash bin that residents said had not been emptied in a month. An unlocked first-floor apartment had been vacant for weeks and was filled with flies, old appliances and graffiti.

To improve living conditions and curb crime, Posner said, "The police can't do it by themselves and I can't do it by myself and the community can't do it by themselves. It's all about communication."

"It's a constant fight," Posner said. "There's always something new."

Caption: 3 PICS 1 MAP
1. Making inroads: Ed Posner drives his truck around Azalea Park, where he is organizing residents to improve the area. 2. Target: An overflowing trash container in the 2600 block of 44th Street is an example of what needs to be cleaned up. Apartment residents said it had not been emptied in a month. An unlocked first-floor apartment had been vacant for weeks and was filled with flies, old appliances and graffiti.

Corrections: CORRECTIONS A photo of an overflowing trash bin that appeared with a story Friday about the efforts of a neighborhood association in Azalea Park was not taken in Azalea Park but in a neighborhood nearby. The San Diego Union-Tribune regrets the error. (B-2:1,6,7,9) 4. AZALEA NEIGHBORHOOD FIGHTS BACK (B-2:1,6,7,9) 1,2,3. Union-Tribune / CHARLES STARR 4. UNION-TRIBUNE
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Edition: 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9
Section: LOCAL
Page: B-1:1,6,7,8,9 B-3:2,3,4,5
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Index Terms: ARRESTS ; CRIME ; DRUGS ; MULTIPLE ; NEIGHBORHOODS ; ORGANIZATIONS ; POLICE ; PREVENTION ; THEFTS ; VANDALISM ; WASTE
Record Number: UTS1113577