



Wednesday, September 25, 2002, 12:00 a.m. Pacific

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Neighbors take back their street

By Caitlin Cleary

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MUKILTEO — Two years ago, meth entered the quiet cul-de-sac of suburban professional Susan York, transforming the landscape of tidy duplexes, basketball hoops and koi ponds into what York calls "a war zone."

A young woman bought the last house on the dead-end street and brought her methamphetamine habit with her. The house just outside the Mukilteo city limits quickly became known as a place where methamphetamine was cooked and dealt.

Cars peeled out of the neighborhood after visiting the house for 10 minutes. Fights broke out in the middle of the night. The revolving door of occupants exhibited bizarre behavior: tearing apart stolen cars and appliances on the lawn and climbing onto the roof to sweep it clean. Pit bulls attacked neighborhood pets, children were stepping over discarded chemical bottles and needles.

"It was a nightmare," York said.

But as the neighborhood was transformed, so was York.

York organized her scared but defiant neighbors into a watch group called Operation Lead On, which dogged the meth dealers and their customers with video cameras, 911 calls and near constant surveillance. The work they did helped Snohomish County sheriff's deputies make more than 25 arrests at the house.

The warm and chatty hotel-marketing manager with a husband and young daughter now knows all about state search-and-seizure laws, about the manufacture and the physiological effects of methamphetamine, which officials call the biggest public-health problem in Snohomish County.

York never seriously considered moving. "From the beginning, I thought to myself, 'No, I'm not going to take this,' " she said.

In large part due to the work done by neighbors, the meth problem — along with the house's occupants — have moved on. In June, a young couple bought the house and gutted it, pulling up carpets, patching the bullet holes and replacing the appliances that were ripped out and sold for meth fixes. On Saturday, the neighborhood will hold a block party to celebrate how they battled, and ultimately helped oust, the meth dealers and reclaimed their street.

York wants their story to be the handbook for other neighborhoods in Snohomish County, where meth presents an ever-growing threat. Two-thirds of crimes committed in the county can be traced to it, according to county Prosecuting Attorney Jim Krider; county human-services officials say two-thirds of state Child Protective Services cases involve parents addicted to meth.

Snohomish County sheriff's Deputy Mike Roskind has tracked the approximately 75 known drug houses in the South Precinct, which stretches from Everett to the King County line. Of those, 25 are considered to be extremely active. And about five or six of those have gotten the attention of neighborhood-watch groups such as Operation Lead On. When a meth house opens in a neighborhood, there is a corresponding spike in area crime, from burglary to stolen cars to so-called soft theft of identity fraud and check fraud.

Despite this, the flophouses are difficult to crack, as all transactions are done out of sight of police. Meth-dealing homeowners are protected by the privacy afforded by the Fourth Amendment's search-and-seizure laws. Unincorporated Snohomish County also attracts meth dealers with its lack of an abatement ordinance (a tool the Prosecuting Attorney's Office can use to seize a house) and its relatively low levels of staffing — just 0.67 deputies per 1,000 residents, compared with 1.3 per 1,000 in King County.

Roskind said many drug dealers know Snohomish County is an easier place to operate in, and they simply move in.

What is easier for drug dealers turned out to be a faith-testing, nerve-jangling exercise in community policing for residents of the cul-de-sac. On one occasion, a wanted felon approached York's family with a bat. On another, she woke up to see deputies with shields and rifles running through her yard; they were performing a "high-risk entry."

York learned as she went along, from deputies, dispatchers, even from meth dealers themselves, who were paranoid but often candid with York about their schemes to escape detection.

If the meth dealers got radio scanners, the neighbors got scanners. If the meth dealers got "bionic ears" — devices that can pick up sounds and conversations from blocks away — the neighbors communicated with notes and codes.

With militarylike precision and purpose, neighbors slept and worked in shifts. They created a phone tree for communication among neighbors. Their children were trained in how to confidently and efficiently speak to dispatchers. At night, neighbors scooted under cars to retrieve hidden license-plate information, faxing in detailed logs of plate numbers, suspect descriptions and movements. A number of the arrests for stolen vehicles and burglary were made as a result of their 911 calls and plate information.

Talking to York today, you often hear an impressive stream of police jargon tumble casually from her speech or see her watching from the corner of her eye, memorizing the clothing and bags of strangers who cross her path. She calls the deputies her heroes and does volunteer work for the Sheriff's Office to lighten their workload.

Most importantly, Operation Lead On has cemented friendships among York and other neighbors of meth houses, such as Tina Haggett, a 23-year resident who, with her neighbors, put up an attention-getting sign reading "Got Meth?" across the street from her neighborhood drug house, which is not far from York's. Or Jerry Rowe, a laid-off Boeing employee who only with help from his watchdog Rusty

and prescription Xanax can get any sleep.

In the end, it wasn't the stakeouts or the myriad 911 calls that ejected the meth-addicted woman from York's neighborhood.

"She couldn't make her mortgage payments," said York. "All the neighbors called her mortgage company, saying this is a known drug house and begging the lender not to let this woman's relatives get the house back."

As many people besides Deputy Roskind have said, there's more than one way to skin a cat.

"I don't care if the cat gets up and leaves or if you have to kick it out," Roskind said. "We have a responsibility to shut these people down."

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