

**HERMAN GOLDSTEIN
EXCELLENCE IN
PROBLEM-SOLVING
AWARD SUBMISSION**

"Crestmont Community Policing"

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WHAT WAS THE PROBLEM:

① ...OPEN AIR DRUG SALES, SO BLATANT THAT STREETS WERE IMPASSABLE.;

BLOCKED WITH CARS MAKING "DRUG BUYS..."

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② ..CITIZENS THROW BOTTLES AT MARKED POLICE VEHICLES AS THEY ENTER

THE NEIGHBORHOOD TO ENFORCE THE LAW...

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③ ...TURF WARS, DRIVE-BY SHOOTINGS, THE FIREBOMBING OF A HOUSE...

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④ ...RUN-DOWN HOUSING, LOITERING, ABANDONED VEHICLES, TRASH,
INTIMIDATION AND CONFUSION...

Sounds like many inner city neighborhoods doesn't it? But it's not. These conditions existed in a small neighborhood called Crestmont, which is located in an affluent first-class township know as Abington. Crestmont is a 19 square block area on the west side of the township and is one of the oldest, most established neighborhoods in Abington. The residents of Crestmont predominantly are of African-American heritage.

Most of the illegal activity, violence and confusion was centered around a three-block area in the center of which was the Crestmont Country Club/Bar. The bar has been a meeting place for generations of Crestmont residents. However, with the arrival of crack cocaine in the mid-1980's, the convenient location and established clientel made it a natural draw for undesireables. Which resulted in drive-by shootings and drug "turf wars.

In March 1992, under the direction of the Community Policing Sergeant George Megelsh, as a pilot program, I was selected to implement community policing in this, our most troubled neighborhood. With a three year grant commitment and a bare-bones budget which funded only salary, overtime, uniform, radio and gun, my mission was to "get inside" this community and achieve positive, long-term results.

Once "inside" I discovered that the critical public safety concerns of police focused legitimately on the bar. However, problems such as abandoned housing and vehicles^Jittered streets, loitering, noise, fear, nothing for the children do to, and no positive adult role models were seemed to be the more critical concerns of the community, the underlying problems that, left unattended, were the malignancy that would eat away at the tiny bits of optimism and fight that still remained with law-abiding residents.

FOR WHOM WAS IT A PROBLEM?

The problems in crestmont effected the entire Township one way or another. (Residents) were being victimized by an increasing presence of illegal drug trafficking, along with decaying properties and loud, disorderly groups loitering on street corners which brought fear and disillusionment. The drug connection had caused an increase in robbery, burglary, theft and prostitution activity in the neighborhood resulting in a disproportionate distribution of Township resources and police being dedicated to the area. Through the late 1980's, problems in this neighborhood escalated into turf wars, drive-by shootings and ultimately, the firebombing of a newly constructed home suspected of being used for police surveillance.

WHO WAS AFFECTED BY THE PROBLEM AND HOW WERE THEY AFFECTED?

Law abiding citizens in the neighborhood itself were most severely effected; and the children, not allowed to play outside, and not much more than drug dealers as role models. The residents lacked unity and were unwilling to trust anyone outside the community; even those who were trying to help. So much so, that the residents would fight the police to protect the drug dealers who, in effect, had made them prisoners in their own homes.

HOW DID THE DEPARTMENT HANDLE THE PROBLEM IN THE PAST?

The logical approach was to shut down the sale and distribution of drugs in the neighborhood. Unfortunately, this action only created an opportunity for drug king-pins from neighboring Philadelphia to come to the area and vie for the, now open, lucrative turf.

Police executives scheduled open community meetings in an effort to explore new, mutually agreeable options. These meetings were met with extreme hostility. You must remember that, to the community at this time, the police were nothing more than nameless, faceless uniforms in vehicles speeding through their streets, making arrests and agitating the negative forces in the neighborhood.

WHAT INFORMATION WAS COLLECTED ABOUT THE PROBLEM?

From the police perspective:

- Enforcement alone was not sufficient for long-term results.
- Community meetings were ineffective as the police were not trusted and perceived as intruders.

From **the** resident's perspective:

- Children were primarily seeing drug dealers as role models.
- Abandoned housing and dark, littered streets were primary contributors to the drug problem.
- Loud, disorderly groups and open consumption of alcohol caused fear and intimidation.
- The children have nothing to do.
- Police don't care.
- Law abiding citizens felt alone and powerless to try to take back their neighborhood.

WERE THERE ANY DIFFICULTIES IN GETTING THE INFORMATION?

When I first entered the neighborhood, the streets were quiet with amazement. Residents must have thought me crazy as they watched attentively out of their windows. A "cop" who not only stopped his vehicle in this volatile neighborhood, but who got out and walked away from its protective shell into the dark, unprotected streets. Streets the residents themselves had abandoned long ago. **When residents saw that I made arrests, moved the loiterers and began the process of having lighting installed, vehicles moved and houses boarded up, they started coming out of their houses and speaking to me. These conversations, combined with a neighborhood survey, helped me to determine the real concerns of this community.** More importantly, the residents got to know a police officer. They learned I had a name, and that I was a husband and father. They invited me into their homes and shared their meals with me. We built mutual trust and respect which was demonstrated by their actions when:

- About three months into my mission, I was making an arrest and unaware of a second suspect in the area. I was attacked from behind. Taken off guard I was in trouble until a neighborhood resident got involved and distracted the second suspect long enough for

me to regain control of the situation.

- Although the streets were reasonably clear of drug dealers, the occasional one would infiltrate the area. Previously the residents would protect the dealers, but now, seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, they would call the police department and identify not only the dealer but in which pocket he kept the stash.
- Beat officers in the area were accused of making racial slurs during a foot pursuit. Residents called to say that it wasn't the officers but the bystanders whom they later identified for the Chief.
- When the Rodney King verdict was announced, I went to the neighborhood bar to have breakfast. If there would be trouble, this is where it would happen. There were no questions or comments after the televised verdict and breakfast was delicious.

WHAT WAS THE GOAL OF THE PROBLEM-SOLVING EFFORT?

Although hundreds of thousands of Federal dollars were used to improve the physical appearance of this neighborhoods, i.e.; fixing street and sidewalks, rehabilitating housing and building new affordable housing, etc., there would never be enough money to throw at this problem and make it go away. The goal of this problem-solving effort was to achieve a positive impact on the quality of life in this troubled neighborhood using the tools of trust, communication, cooperation, persistence, stamina, mutual respect, and education.

WHAT STRATEGIES WERE DEVELOPED TO REACH THAT GOAL?

Enforcement was the easy part. Addressing the earlier identified needs of the families, homes and neighborhood required a more creative approach.

Role Models: First and foremost I had to try to reach the children. It is important to provide positive role models for children to assure that drug dealers were not considered to be viable candidates. I organized youth trips to places like the New Jersey State Aquarium at Camden, the Franklin Institute Science Museum, the Philadelphia Zoo and the Academy of Natural Sciences. I took them to Phillies, Eagles and 76er's games and acquired weeks of free bowling for the kids to participate in a league-like environment. I received tremendous cooperation from the Chief, Township Commissioners, fellow Officers, Dispatchers, Township Staff and Moms and Dads when I requested that they participate as chaperons. Their presence would help to provide positive role models. The tickets and transportation were donated by local businesses.

Crestmont Country Club (CCC Bar): As earlier stated, the CCC has been the focal point of much of the illegal activity over the years. In fact, in a six month period, this three-block area was responsible for more violence than in the rest of the township.

Due to my rapport with the community, I learned that the bar would soon be put up for sale. I immediately contacted the Township's Community Development group and began to research options for the County to purchase and redevelop the property. After nine months of negotiation, it appears the property will be purchased jointly with the Township and redeveloped into new, affordable twin homes; eliminating the potential for a new haven for violence and criminal activity.

Medical Issues: Working in cooperation with Abington Hospital, I coordinated free health screenings for the neighborhood using the Police Department's community policing vehicle. I also worked with the local Lions club to provide free vision examinations for the many low/moderate income residents who live in Crestmont. In addition, information on the

Childrens' Health Insurance Program (C.H.I.P.S.), which offers subsidized health insurance for children (based on family income and age of the child) was brought directly to the community. Additionally, residents from Crestmont have been placed on an advisory board to help to educate hospital administrators about community/cultural concerns.

Citizens' Police Academy: Education is the key to mutual understanding and cooperation. Knowing this, I facilitated a Citizens' Police Academy. This academy is designed to provide students with an understanding of why police officers do what they do, and the judiciary and physical tools they have to work with. Free of charge, they are given the knowledge needed to become block/town and neighborhood watch program participants and overall pro-active, informed citizens.

Empowering Residents: Residents of a street in the neighborhood had suffered harassment and abuse by tenants living in a rental property on the block. I encouraged them to unite and walked with them through the steps toward solving this long term problem. Meetings with the property owner, surveillance videos from a neighboring home and cooperation from the Township's Tax Department, encouraged the property owner to evict the tenants. As a result of this positive experience, these citizens work together against crime and any other negative influences in their community.

WHAT AGENCIES HELPED THE POLICE DEPARTMENT IN ACHIEVING THE GOAL?

My efforts in this area were supported township-wide. This includes support by local business, civic and political groups in addition to resources housed and funded by the Township and Police Department.

WAS THE GOAL ACCOMPLISHED?

In a word, YES. And, thanks to the time spent on education, maintenance of this positive change is placed in the capable hands of the Crestmont residents. Although we will always be in the neighborhood as we are throughout the Township, if the community senses something out of line, they know what to do and, if that doesn't work, they know who to call.

In three years this neighborhood has changed from a dismal, littered, drug dealers haven, to a relatively quiet, peaceful neighborhood where, for the first time in 10 years, residents can once again walk the streets safely and with pride.