

ABSTRACT

The Clearwater Police Department, the City of Clearwater and local business people found themselves in the midst of a "MIRACLE ON U.S. 19" this past winter. An image of what appeared to be the Virgin Mary mysteriously appeared on the windows of a building on December 17, 1996. This apparition was discovered by a person leaving the building and reported by local news. By evening, curiosity seekers and the faithful had descended upon the most heavily traveled road in PineUas County to view the image.

The Chy of Clearwater recognized the need to gain control of this situation immediately, as well as prepare for increased visitation during the upcoming holidays. Police established a command post on the property to oversee the visiting throngs. Within days, the city established a cross-departmental team and MIRACLE visitation traffic was controlled. Daily communication with local businesses kept everyone up-to-date, facilitating cooperation between public and private entities.

By Spring 1997, over 500,000 people from around the world had visited Clearwater's MIRACLE. Thanks to the planning efforts and teamwork from all city departments, no MIRACLE visitors were injured and control costs were minimized.

The image continues to attract visitors as Clearwater prepares for Christmas 1997.

The City of Clearwater is a gulf coast resort/tourist community with a population of 105,000. The Clearwater Police Department has 258 sworn personnel and the city employs approximately 1,600 people. On a daily basis during non-tourist months, the police department serves approximately 150,000 people who live and/or work within Clearwater's city limits. At the height of the winter tourist season, this number jumps to nearly 200,000. On December 17,1996, just a week before Christmas, a MIRACLE appeared on the side of a building that would change the way the police department and the city would operate during the holiday season and the many weeks following.

A. Scanning

On Tuesday, December 17,1996, what seemed to be an image of the Virgin Mary was visible on the side of a three-story, glass-sided building in Clearwater, Florida. The initial sighting was reported by a citizen to local media outlets who aired the story on the noon news. Within hours, traffic on the busiest roadway in Pinellas County - U. S. Highway 19 — was at a virtual standstill. The Clearwater Police Department received numerous reports of citizens running across all six lanes of U.S. 19, dodging traffic. Scores of motorists parked their cars along the highway's right-of-way to glimpse the image.

The police department's initial analysis of the problem was traffic and crowd control related. The parking area of the building could not handle the hundreds of vehicles and the thousands of pedestrians that would eventually descend upon the image. The crowds, while mostly in awe of the apparition, needed to be controlled to minimize property damage to the image and the surrounding landscape. Eventually, concern over

large amounts of money which were left as donations and burning candles placed at the site also had to be addressed.

Traffic and pedestrian safety were of the utmost concern. U.S. Highway 19 is the most heavily traveled roadway in Pinellas County. The particular intersection where the image is located is the most dangerous intersection for traffic accidents in all of Clearwater. The roadway is a north and south throughway which is six laned and has a 50 m.p.h. speed limit. It runs the entire length of Pinellas County.

Clearwater Police Department has selected this particular problem as one of Clearwater's best examples of problem solving due to the need for immediate response for the safety of the on-lookers. Of course, other issues surfaced as the MIRACLE visitations increased - such as staffing levels over extended periods, upset merchants, media relations, and how to pay for the rising costs of the extra staffing.

B. Analysis

The police department immediately established a command post in the parking lot of the Seminole Finance Company (now Ugly Duckling Car Sales) to observe the crowds. The command post was staffed with paramedics and police officials. As time permitted, district commanders met with affected local businesses to solicit their support and cooperation. Most were cooperative and offered the use of their facilities for city workers.

Not knowing how the image appeared also prevented the police department in determining how long the image would be visible. Nevertheless, the Christmas holiday season arrived and the police department stepped up the MIRACLE staffing, at least until

January 1,1997, in anticipation of the large crowds that would congregate to view this holiest of images.

The image remains on the building windows to this very day. Glass experts have surmised that the image was formed by sprinkler water and wind; however, someone recently attempted to vandalize the image by throwing acid on the glass. Within days, the stain disappeared, but the image remained. It has also been speculated that the image has been on the building for some time ~ maybe even years — but had been hidden by palm trees.

Essentially, the greatest harm caused by the appearance of the MIRACLE was to the motorists traveling on U. S. 19 and to the businesses operating in the area. Traffic became much more congested than usual, affecting the late season Christmas shopper's ability to travel to the malls, ultimately affecting the local businesses. The image is located between two of Pinellas County's largest malls and across the street from a strip shopping center which includes Target and Home Depot, both major players at Christmas time.

After the police department and city officials gained control over the situation, they met with local business owners and operators to help address their concerns and try to answer any questions they may have had.

C. Response

There were no response alternatives to this particular problem. The image existed on the side of a building and, short of removing the glass, there was nothing anybody was going to do about it. The police department, along with the city manager and other

department directors, developed the Miracle Management Team to devise both short term and long term strategies. The Miracle Management Team consisted of representatives from the City Manager's Office, Economic Development, Tourism, Chamber of Commerce, Police and Fire Departments and other selected departments. The Miracle Management Team was instrumental in developing and implementing a plan to deal with the situation.

Certainly one of the biggest short-term problems facing the police department was staffing levels. Once the image was aired on local television stations, thousands of people flocked to the site. The police department responded by re-assigning, for the short-term, existing patrol officers, until a complete deployment plan could be developed. The police department began escorting the throngs of visitors across the highways. The city's Traffic Engineering Department and the Florida Department of Transportation, at the request of the police department, placed portable, electronic signs on the roadways warning motorists of potential hazards.

City officials became concerned that police department service to the rest of the city would be affected by the re-deployment of police personnel. The Miracle Management Team met and decided to utilize personnel from all city departments to assist the police department in both information management and pedestrian safety. By day three of the sighting, estimated daily crowd totals were at 60,000.

The city established a specific payroll code so costs could be tracked. The city also established a hot-line telephone number that provided alternate routes and information on parking and traffic problems. This hot-line service helped to cut down on the amount of phone calls pouring into the police department's communications center.

More than 2,000 calls were recorded by the hot-line in a week. The police department with the assistance of the Community Response Team (Clearwater's code enforcement group) solicited help from local businesses to help regulate the vendors and solicitors that appeared at the site almost as miraculously as the image. The police department, with the consent of the local businesses, was allowed to issue trespass warnings to vendors who "set up shop" on the businesses' properties.

Staffing levels during the initial phase were set at 24 employees on two eight-hour shifts and a lesser contingent during slower night time hours. By day four of the sighting, it was estimated that on a daily basis over 70,000 people were converging on a postage stamp sized area of Clearwater.

Media concerns were addressed by allowing the media complete access to the image. A specific area was designated for the parking of media satellite trucks near the site that allowed a great view of the image, as well as the throngs of people -- and provided the media with some modicum of security. The image was broadcast on television nationwide and by the third day had gone global. As the image persisted, representatives from news affiliates from as far away as Italy came to Clearwater to view, first-hand, the Madonna-like image.

When planning the response for the long term, staffing levels, public safety and costs were all considered. The main goal for all the planning was to ensure public safety in the best ways possible —meaning not only public safety for those visiting the image, but for ALL of the City of Clearwater.

Several specific issues needed to be addressed, including: parking for visitors; safe crossing walks for visitors; sanitation; potential threats of damage to the image; and,

how long the city should be responsible for the security of the site. Working with area businesses, the police department was able to establish parking areas which would be designated for the site and allow handicap access to the site as well. Additionally, businesses allowed portable toilets to be installed for the public's use. Police department representatives and representatives from other city departments met on a one to one basis with business in the affected area almost daily. They allowed the business owners to vent their frustrations, tell the city what it was doing right and wrong and allow the business owners to offer suggestions for improving the situation. Overall, these meeting proved to be a great help in developing long term plans.

The issue of pedestrians crossing the major roadways was also of great concern. The police department could not provide 24 hour a day crossing guards - nor could any other city department. The short term solution was to mark specific pedestrian crossing areas on the roadways using cones and signs. The long term solution was to install a traffic signal near the site. The light was initially controlled by police department employees while the crowds were still large; however, in February, the police department was able to put the light on an on-call status. This signal allowed the police department to reduce the number of employees which were needed to be assigned to cross pedestrians.

Throughout the duration of this project, numerous threats of potential damage to the image were received. One local radio station even dared its listeners to damage the vision, thereby allowing things to return to normal.

None of the threats panned out until recently. On or about May 26,1997, someone threw a substance, thought to be acid, on the image. Additionally, a locked steel

box was installed by the building owner to provide security for money being left as "gifts" for the vision. The money is donated to local charities.

Part of the success of this response was the availability and cooperation of the other city departments and the willingness of the city manager to re-assign those personnel to assist the police department. Nearly every city department that could afford to allow their personnel to volunteer to work the event participated. These included departments such as Human Resources, Solid Waste, Community Response, Central Permitting, Engineering, General Services and Public Works.

Before implementing any long term strategies, a search by police department employees on the Internet was done. The police department had hoped to gain insight into how other cities across the nation may have handled similar situations. Other local law enforcement agencies and municipal leaders were contacted to help arrive at a consensus of how the incident should be handled. Fortunately for the Clearwater Police Department it has had experience in dealing with large numbers of people at several special events. The police department has a specific traffic plan to handle the large number of vehicles and pedestrians that flock to Clearwater Beach as a Spring Break Mecca each year. Annually, the department handles the spring training traffic concerns for the Philadelphia Phillies and traffic and crowd control for the world renowned Clearwater Jazz Holiday. However, nothing could have prepared the department and the city for what it was about to encounter.

Very few difficulties emerged in the implementation of the response plan. There were some disgruntled business people initially and a few misguided visitors, but essentially the plan went off without difficulty. Personnel from every city department

were responsible for implementing the plan. The main personnel overseeing the implementation of the plan were the Patrol District Commanders with the Miracle Management Team.

D. Assessment

The response plan was extremely successful. Without having a specific plan of response such as the one the city developed and implemented, there would have been many upset business people, pedestrians would likely have been injured, and the city and the police department would have come under even greater scrutiny for its handling of traffic and crowds visiting the image.

The methods of evaluating the success of the plan were pretty simple. The lack of injuries, the lack of complaints and the minimal costs involved were viewed as the best gauges to evaluate the plan's success. Using these guidelines, the Miracle Management Team was primarily responsible for evaluating the effectiveness of the plan.

Certainly the response goals of public safety were met. The fact that there were no traffic-related injuries, no vandalism to the image, and no slowdown in police or city services to the rest of the city helped ensure the goal was met. After the long-term deployment plan ~ which utilized on-duty personnel from all city departments ~ was implemented, costs were kept to a minimum.

The police department does not believe that the response could have been any more effective. Never before in the history of Clearwater have all the various departments come together and worked to resolve an issue more quickly, more decisively, nor more effectively. Everyone was willing to help the police department in any way

possible. Additionally, businesses in the affected area cooperated exceptionally well with the police department. All of these actions combined to make a successful and effective response.

The police department did not have any concerns about displacing the image; however, department leadership was aware of the other connected problems that could have occurred due to the large numbers of people. Problems such as price gouging, unlawful vendors, assaults, robberies, and traffic accidents would have occurred had the city and police department not gained quick and effective control of the situation. However, none of these potential problems ever developed.

The police department maintained its modified plans until early March 1997 and watched for the potential resurgence of the image visitation problems during the holidays around Easter. No significant events materialized during this time. The police department continue to monitor the situation - visitors are still observed at the image on a daily basis. Clearwater is also anticipating increased visitation as the winter holidays approach.

AGENCY AND OFFICER INFORMATION

This problem solving solution was implemented department wide and affected nearly every officer in the department, as well as almost every city employee in other departments. No specific training in community policing to address this problem was given; however, the department does have specially trained community policing officers who assisted with the plan. There were no additional incentives given to any officer or employee to work the event.

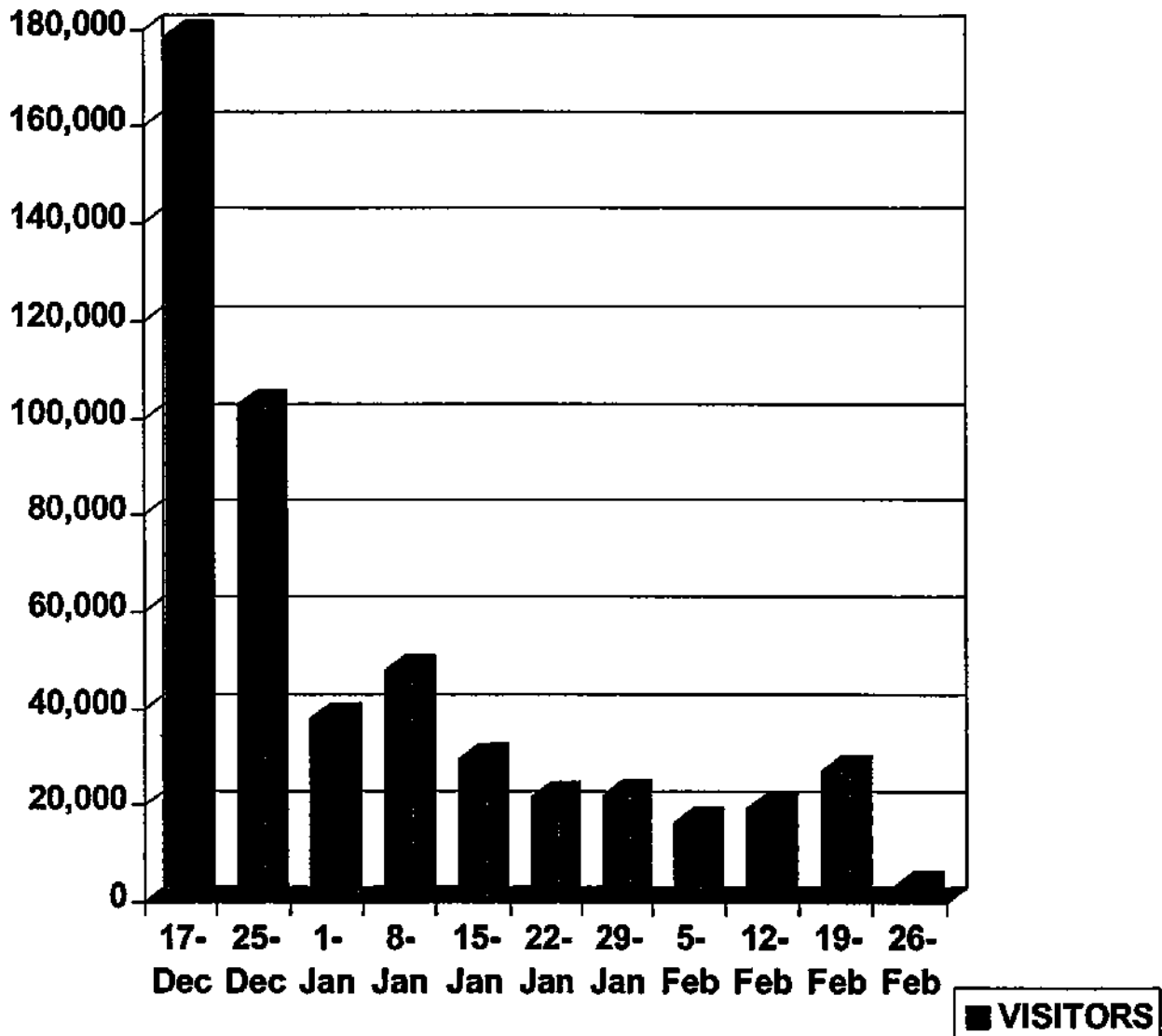
The biggest resource commitments made to this project were in the area of personnel and the costs associated with those personnel. Total costs to date, including the use of on-duty personnel, overtime personnel and part-time personnel are approximately \$200,000 city wide. Total attendance at the site to date is conservatively estimated at 580,000 people.

The contact person for this project is Sid Klein, Chief of Police. The Chief ultimately managed the implementation of this plan and served as a member of the Miracle Management Team.

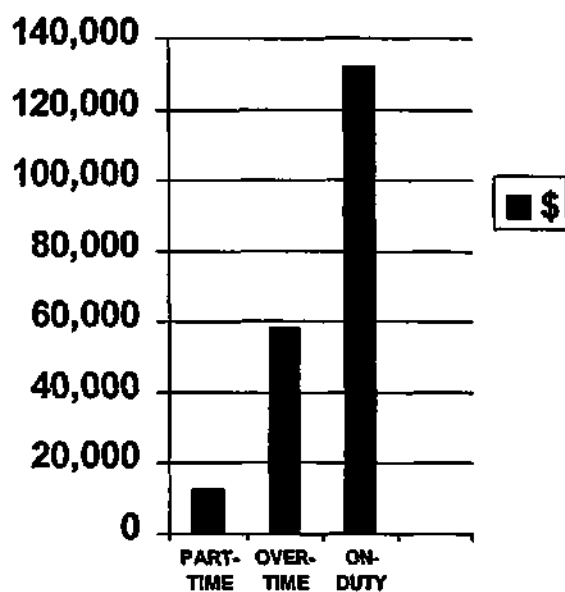
The address for the Clearwater Police Department is 645 Pierce St., Clearwater, Florida 33756. The phone number for the Chief of Police is 813-562-4343; the fax number is 813-562-4339. An e-mail contact is Sgt. Douglas L. Griffith, Administrative Assistant to the Chief at jonathon@cftnet.com.

Overall, Clearwater's MIRACLE has been the city's most successful venture into a true problem oriented policing incident ever encountered. Without the collaboration and support of the many city departments, local businesses and the city manager's office, this plan would not have been successful. The city received many accolades from the media and citizens praising it for its efforts and quick response in handling the event. Being able to control the normal increased tourist population, as well as nearly quadrupling that population for the image visitations, was a real test of problem oriented policing and solving abilities.

VISITORS TO THE VIRGIN MARY



CITY-WIDE PERSONNEL COSTS



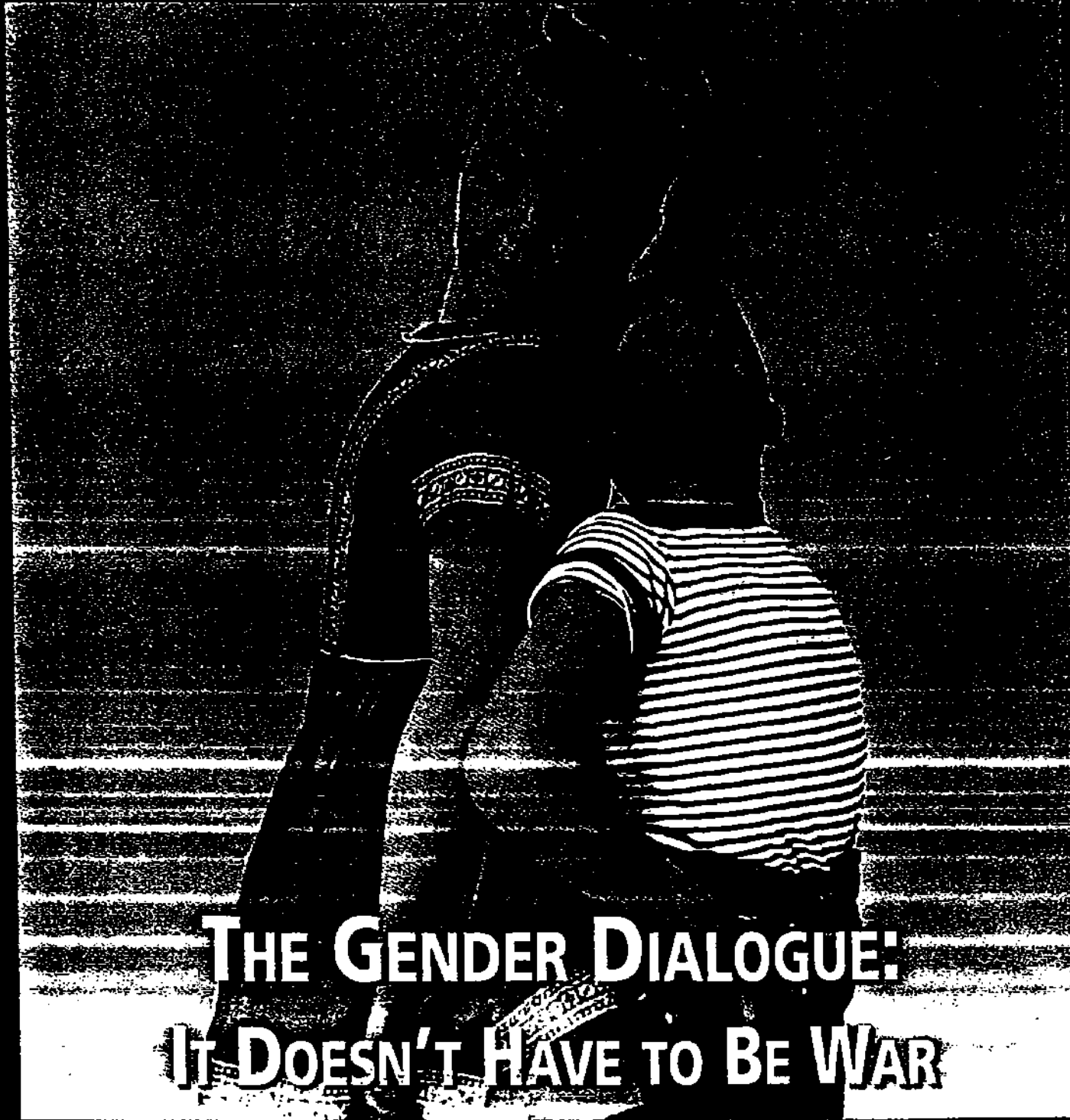
- PART TIME COSTS WERE \$12,521
- OVERTIME COSTS WERE \$58,580
- ON-DUTY COSTS WERE \$131,913

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PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

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Managing a Miracle: A City's Response to an Unexpected Religious Event

Kathy Rice and Sid Klein

It was Thursday morning, a week before Christmas 1996.

The city manager's office in Clearwater, Florida, received a call from the police chief, who reported that hundreds of people were walking and running through parking lots and dodging traffic across a six-lane highway to glimpse what appeared to be an image of the Virgin Mary on the side of a three-story, glass-sided building.

A local television station carried the story on its noon broadcast, and within hours, traffic became gridlocked along miles of roadways leading to the glimmering image. Scores of motorists abandoned their cars in the right-of-way and raced to the building.

That evening, all the local television stations led their news broadcasts with the story of the image, and the mass media descended upon the Gulf Coast resort city of 100,000 like a flock of seagulls on an unsuspecting tourist. Within three days, the story of the image and the ever-burgeoning numbers of visitors became one of national—and then international—interest.

Thousands of believers called the vision "a miracle." But considering that the shimmering image was on a building at the intersection of U.S. Highway 19 and Drew Street, a junction that has the city's highest incidence of traffic accidents,

the "miracle" to city officials was that over a period of months, not a single pedestrian was injured.

Managing 580,000 Visitors

Such was the situation confronting Clearwater City Manager Betty Deptula and Police Chief Sid Klein in the final weeks of 1996. The enormous task of managing the overwhelming influx of cars and buses and the 580,000 (as of February 1997) well-behaved visitors tested the resources of Clearwater's police department and emergency management team, and of almost every single department in the city government.

Of immediate and paramount concern that December Thursday was the traffic situation along the primary north/south traffic artery through the city. Fortunately, the police department was well versed in handling similar traffic situations, having for years dealt with such events as the college spring break, big league baseball's spring training, and the nationally prominent Clearwater Jazz Holiday.

Police, joined by a contingent of paramedics, immediately set up a command post in the parking lot of the Seminole Finance Company, on whose building the stunning image was visible. Within hours, patrol officers were reassigned, traffic patterns were established, and pedestrians were escorted across two of the city's busiest highways. Portable electronic message signs were placed along the roadways to advise motorists of the traffic slowdown and to warn them of pedestrians in the roadway. Civic-minded business owners allowed visitors to use their parking lots. And the crowd grew into the hundreds.

Overnight, police department employees searched the Internet for similar situations and for advice on how to address this kind of unanticipated event. Other law enforcement agencies were queried, and strategies were discussed within the department and among several municipal department directors.



What appeared to be the image of the Virgin Mary on a glass-sided building in Clearwater, Florida, brought thousands of visitors to the city.

Days Iliwo and Three

By day two, the local media had carried the story across the central Florida region, and wire services were spreading the word from Sacramento to Schenectady. The media and their attendant satellite trucks, portable studios, antenna links, and miles of snaking cables were assigned a specific site, which allowed them a great view of the vision and the crowds and also provided them with a measure of security. This was the first of a number of public relations coups. And the numbers of visitors ran into the thousands.

Both the city manager's office and the police public information office were inundated with telephone calls from as far away as Japan, South America, and Europe. *Good Morning America* sent a crew to Clearwater for a live, pre-dawn network feed. CNN, *The Times* of London, and the Canadian Broadcasting Company conducted long-distance interviews. And on the third day, the story had spread around the globe.

Realizing that the event was one that could quickly tax the city's resources, Manager Deptula convened a meeting of

department directors to identify both short- and long-term strategies. The finance department set up a special code for tracking all costs associated with the event. Public relations staff were asked to frame the city's role in addressing the high-profile situation. The level of interdepartmental integration and cooperation was gratifying to witness, and we called ourselves—to the delight of the media and the citizenry—the Miracle Management Team.

The team's mission was quickly defined as that of a public safety task force. Various city departments assigned on-duty civilian employees to augment the police officers' assignments at the scene of the image, greatly alleviating both the fiscal and manpower demands made on the police. The Miracle Management Team and the unified city departments focused their efforts on ensuring pedestrian safety and smooth traffic flow. For, by now, the number of visitors had eclipsed 60,000, and the numbers still were growing.

The team established a telephone number, immediately disseminated by the media, that allowed the curious and the anxious to get up-to-the-minute in-

formation on parking, traffic problems, and alternate access routes. The city advised its employees of its own official position on the appearance of the image on the building, thereby preventing them from becoming the targets of unfair judgment or condemnation by the media or other visitors.

Day Four and on Through The Holidays

By the fourth day, as many as 70,000 visitors a day were making daily journeys converging on an area no larger than two square city blocks. Staffing was set at 24 employees on two eight-hour shifts (8 a.m. to 4 p.m., 4 p.m. to midnight) and a lesser complement during the late-night hours. Vendors and solicitors were prohibited from preying on the masses through the use of city codes and agreements with the owner of the private property on which the image had appeared.

Those who believed the image was a holy sign—and their numbers were legion—brought prayer candles, missives, and offerings to the base of the image. Firefighters monitored the thousands of candles, and a strongbox was provided so that the pilgrims' donations would not be stolen. (All money was donated to local charities.) Police and fire department Explorers provided food and drinks to the city employees, who because of the sheer numbers of vehicles in the area couldn't get to local restaurants for meals.

Nearly every business within a one-mile radius of the image scene was visited by members of the city's economic development department, who solicited suggestions and information on problems relating to the crush of visitors. A letter from Manager Deptula reiterated the city's role in the spectacle and provided municipal telephone numbers for those business owners who had questions. The police lieutenant in charge of the scene visited daily those businesses in the immediate vicinity of the Seminole Finance Building, to keep business-

people informed and to address problems before they became thorny issues.

City officials took great pains to minimize business disruptions by installing traffic barricades and adjusting traffic flow whenever it ebbed. The city also had portable toilet facilities delivered to the site, a measure appreciated by employees, the media, and the public alike. And by Christmas, more than 500,000 visitors had made the pilgrimage to witness the image.

Shortly after the holidays, the Miracle Management Team adopted a plan to scale back the city's efforts and manpower as part of a long-range situation-management strategy. It was apparent that the number of visitors was declining, now that the holy days had passed. Across one of the highways, a traffic signal was installed that acted as a beacon, drawing visitors to a safe highway crossing. Eventually, the police command post and portable toilets were removed, and a small contingent of civilian police service technicians were assigned to the image detail, freeing up patrol officers for their traditional duties.

The city's success in handling what could have been a crippling situation was measured, in large part, by the supportive tenor of all the media reports and by the endorsement of area businesses. Television commentators and newspaper editorialists praised the city for its expedient and even-handed response to a situation beyond its control. Citizens were particularly vocal in their outpourings of thanks.

And through it all, not a single person out of 580,000 visitors was injured crossing the busy highways. A mirage indeed!

Lessons Learned

Here are some of the insights that city employees gained.

Mobilize public safety efforts as soon as possible. Support your on-site employees. If you are not there for

them, they will not be there for you. Establish a traffic plan and safe pedestrian thoroughfare as soon as possible.

Orient your employees. They must know what is expected of them, as well as the city's position on the governing issue. Discuss with them whom to call under what circumstances, the need to respect the beliefs of others, and their responsibility to conduct themselves as professionals.

Familiarize yourself with the pertinent laws and ordinances that may come into play, such as the restrictions on vendors, and stick to the rules.

Gather as much information as possible about how other local governments and agencies have handled similar situations. Clearwater officials found a wealth of practical information on the Internet Share with all employees the city's position, and reinforce it often.

Make personal visits to affected businesses to let them know what is happening and to advise them of any plans that may involve their business. Be prepared to help, and be flexible.

A car wash, for example, was all but shut down by the traffic and parking patterns during the height of the image event. It was allowed to sell commemorative t-shirts, disposable cameras, and other items that roving vendors were not permitted to sell at the scene.

Assign a professional and experienced staff to handle media relations. The media appetite is insatiable, and you do not want media people feeding on you.

Keep a running count of the costs associated with such an event, so that this information can be shared with the media on a timely basis. Also, work with members of the media to see that their wants and needs (within reason) are met. It was a pleasure to have the media singing the city's praises so frequently.

React quickly, implement plans immediately, and begin long-range planning as time allows.

Create a deescalation plan, and monitor its effectiveness regularly.

In the space of just seven weeks, visitors numbering more than five times the city's permanent population flocked to a two-square-block section of Clearwater to participate in an unprecedented and unplanned event. But planning, research, interdepartment coordination, speedy action, and a lot of common sense resulted in a minimal impact on the city's day-to-day functions.

Thank God for small miracles. QD

Kathy Rice is deputy city manager and Sid Klein is chief of police, Clearwater, Florida.

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