

Stopping Graffiti

by Jana Sorensen

The petite, blonde woman looked the judge straight in the eye and told him that Eddie, a 17-year-old juvenile, first painted a police homicide code across the side of her home, then threatened to kill her when she confronted him about it. Graffiti was no laughing matter to this woman or her neighbors. Eddie and his friends had spray-painted their entire neighborhood with the gang monikers "Trouble" and "Monster." Houses, fences, cars, poles and curbs were covered. Little was spared. The neighborhood residents were outraged.

Graffiti is a crime that touches many of us. It is visible and it affects us both financially and psychologically. Many people in cities across the nation have become infuriated by it. The cost for graffiti removal in the United States is estimated to exceed \$4 billion annually. The Los Angeles Transit District spends as much as \$13 million annually on graffiti clean-up, and the Arizona Department of Transportation has spent up to \$5 million annually. Public officials and agencies, police departments, businesses and citizen groups have pondered how this costly vandalism can be curbed.

Some have suggested that any attempt to control graffiti using legal means will only cause vandals to counterattack. Indeed, vandals themselves would like us to believe that they cannot be stopped. One Los Angeles writer who had been arrested six times said, "They want to wipe us out. But graffiti will never die." Another vandal remarked, "How are you guys going to make us stop? You don't know how." A New York writer declared, "Graffiti means I'm here...They want to snub us, but they can't." In a 1992 survey, 13 vandals who were questioned regarding what they believed to be the most effective ways to control graffiti reported that law enforcement efforts would be the least effective means to do so. Instead, they rated the following methods as most likely to succeed: (1) legal walls managed by writers; (2) public exhibitions, conventions and shows; (3) centers where writers learn, practice skills; (4) aerosol art contest with prizes; (5) business, cities hiring writers to paint; and (6) publishing aerosol art magazines.

Contrary to these suggestions, however, a recent intensive anti-graffiti effort undertaken in Phoenix has proven that law enforcement strategies are effective. Maricopa County Attorney Richard M. Romley headed the endeavor to halt the county's rapidly increasing problem. The Maricopa County Attorney's Office developed a strong prosecution policy that included much more serious consequences for graffiti vandals than had ever been imposed. Additionally a work program was created for graffiti vandals and other juvenile offenders, based on a no-nonsense, hard-work philosophy. A non-access ordinance geared to stop theft of spray paint was implemented and public schools started a program designed to educate elementary children about graffiti and the destruction it causes. And finally, a county-wide graffiti investigation which not only resulted in the arrest of several vandals, but also provided valuable insight into their thoughts and motivations, was initiated.

This investigation was called Street Art Productions (SAP). It involved undercover police officers from Phoenix and surrounding communities posing as a California production company whose goal was to make a documentary film about graffiti. Fliers were placed on poles near schools, in convenience stores, in hip hop shops, and anywhere that vandals might see them, asking "street artists" to call the SAP studio to schedule a screen test. Scores of people called, and the most daring came in for appointments. These individuals were interviewed on camera about their graffiti by the "director," and then asked to demonstrate their talents on large pieces of butcher paper taped to the studio wall. If a person revealed that he or she had previously painted graffiti that had not been removed, the director asked to film it. Incredibly, several vandals led undercover officers to the sites of their crimes and admitted when and how they had done them.

Jeremy was one of those. He came to the studio with another crew member named Pablo.

Jeremy was 19 years old and was learning the finer points of graffiti from his older counterpart. When asked how he chose a location to vandalize, Jeremy said, "You just pick out...three, four spots and you hit up one spot, then you get in your car and take off to another spot and hit it 'til, you just hit about four times and that'd be, that's a good night, like to hit up about four times, like all around the city." Jeremy was most proud of writing the name of his crew, Just F...ing Criminals (JFK), on a water tower. He explained that he liked the challenge of painting something high with barbed wire around it. He described getting a boost from his friend, then climbing the ladder all the way to the top, which he referred to as the "ultimate heaven." All of this was memorialized on videotape, and Jeremy eventually pled guilty to criminal damage. He was sentenced to three years' probation and two months' jail time, and was ordered to pay \$1,000 in

restitution.

Such serious consequences are standard fare for those adjudicated of graffiti offenses in Maricopa County. Additionally, courts frequently order 80 hours of community service. When the County Attorney's Office adopted these "get tough on graffiti" policies, some top prosecutors questioned whether judges would ever impose such stiff sanctions in light of the volume of violent crimes they see on a daily basis. Romley remained convinced that a line had to be drawn symbolizing what is unacceptable in a community. He feared complacency and believed that the line must be drawn at graffiti. Prosecutors were soon convinced, and as the novelty of the graffiti policy wore off, it gained acceptance throughout the criminal justice system.

Other programs have been developed that have also deterred graffiti vandals, as evidenced by vandals' statements recorded during the SAP undercover investigation. One young man, who was arrested for spray painting freeway walls, worried about the community service program established for graffiti offenders. He said, "...they'll put you on a thing called Project SCRUB, where you gotta go paint graffiti...they take you all in a van and you go around all over Phoenix painting..." SCRUB stands for **Stop Crime Remove Urban Blight**. This program was designed to be a community service program that enables citizens to see that those found guilty of graffiti crimes are required to give something back to their community. Project SCRUB has been a success in part due to assistance from the Arizona Department of Transportation, Maricopa County Flood Control District, and the City of Phoenix whose employees supervise crews of juvenile offenders while they not only paint over graffiti, but also pick up trash, cut weeds and harvest food for the homeless.

Steve, a graffiti vandal prosecuted for damaging a store sign, spoke to SAP cameras about the non-access ordinance, which requires that spray paint retailers place paint in an area that is not accessible to the public without assistance. He related, "...we used to steal [paint], too, when they didn't have them locked up, we used to go and [steal] cases and cases." Steve's proclivity for stealing paint is all too common. Thus, an ordinance was enacted by the City of Phoenix in 1995, and has made it more difficult for vandals to steal paint. One major retailer commented, "There has been no reduction in spray paint sales...Overall, I feel the City of Phoenix ordinance is an excellent means of controlling the spread of graffiti in our valley and should be seriously studied by other metropolitan areas across the country."

Three things have become clear during the course of the anti-graffiti effort in Phoenix. First, law enforcement is effective in deterring graffiti. Second, cooperation among law enforcement officials, governmental agencies, community groups, businesses and the public is necessary to achieve optimum success. Third, halting graffiti is not achievable overnight but requires continuing efforts including future graffiti investigations, as well as an educational program intended to educate children in grades K-8 about the financial and psychological damage that graffiti causes.

Various governmental and citizen groups who paint over graffiti in Maricopa County estimate that it has decreased approximately 70 percent over the last year. Although less measurable, the public perception about graffiti also seems to have changed. A year ago it was not unusual to hear people joke about this crime. But juveniles and others have heard that those who get caught may end being transferred to adult court for prosecution.

Some writers who said that graffiti will never die ought to speak with Bobby, another vandal caught in the SAP investigation. Bobby told Phoenix undercover police officers, "I hear everything's like dying out, I don't know. It started out strong out here [in Phoenix], like a lot of people were into it, you know...there was a lot of crews and then all of a sudden it just died out. Everybody just stopped."

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ENDNOTES

1. Devon D. Brewer, "Hip Hop Graffiti Writers' Evaluations of Strategies to Control Illegal Graffiti," *Human Organization* 51, (Summer 1992): 188.
2. Jeff Ferrell, "Urban Graffiti Crime, Control, and Resistance," *Young & Society* 27, (September 1995): 79.
3. *Id.*, 81.
4. *Id.*
5. *Id.*
6. Brewer, 193-195.
7. Phoenix Police Department, Street Art Productions Videorecording (Phoenix, AZ 1995).
8. *Id.*
9. *Id.*
10. Mike Waddle, Letter from the Glidden Company (Mesa, AZ 1996).
11. Louis A. Schmitt, P.E., Associate Maricopa County Administrator, County Engineer (1996).
12. Phoenix Police Department, Street Art Productions Videorecording (Phoenix, AZ 1995).

