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Cape officers tackle downtown eyesores; Alleyway cleaned of debris, new paint covers old graffiti

By PHILLIP BANTZ



MICHAEL PISTELLA

Lois Murray's Red Barn antiques store has been one of the downtown Cape Coral shops hit by graffiti in recent years.

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For years, more than a dozen downtown Cape Coral business owners have endured the eyesores of derogatory and gang-related graffiti on their buildings and an alleyway littered with household appliances.

Two officers assigned to the city's south district rallied those businesses, assembled a group of youths, struck a deal with Waste Management officials and transformed the area in a matter of hours last Saturday.

Officer Gerald Moll and his supervisor, Sgt. Keith Munzert, of the

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Cape Coral Police Department were assigned to the downtown beat just three weeks ago after officials split the city into north, central and south districts.

“The city was all one district, now that it’s split we can pay more attention to specific areas,” said Munzert. “Breaking it up made it better for us and the community.”

New to the beat, Moll immediately took to the streets on foot, checking in with business owners and examining the piles of garbage left in an alleyway in the 1200 block between Southeast 47th Terrace and Southeast 47th Street.

“It (the garbage and graffiti) was pretty easy to find,” Moll said. “It was a safety hazard and when left alone, it proliferates.”

Lois Murray, owner of the Red Barn antiques store at 4711 Vincennes Blvd., was surprised to glance out her store window and see Moll strolling the streets.

“It was the first time I’ve seen an officer walking the beat in the 11 years I’ve been here,” she said. “He came into the store to meet me on April 5.”

A few days later, Murray arrived at her shop to find a poster taped to the store window declaring the “Holocaust is coming,” she said. It wasn’t the first time Murray had been greeted by a vandal’s handy work. She and others had almost become accustomed to the squalid condition of the alleyway behind their businesses.

“It was a disgrace to look down this alley and see all the trash, debris and graffiti on the buildings,” she said.

Murray had already contacted Waste Management officials about the illegally disposed washing machines, dryers and other appliances left behind her business, but was told she and other business owners would have to pay for the clean up, she said.

After finding the alarming poster, Murray remembered her visit with Moll and contacted the CCPD. Moll and Munzert immediately went to work.

Moll approached Jack Trantina, manager of Flex Bon paints at 1219 S.E. 47th Terrace, and he agreed to donate 10 gallons of paint, brushes, rollers, buckets, primers and all that was needed to cover the graffiti.

“It was pretty bad,” said Trantina. “The alleyway in the back of the store and the buildings were pretty messed up with gang-slang graffiti. It’s been an ongoing eyesore. We’ve been involved over the past three years in trying to get the appliances and everything in the alley cleaned up.”

With the necessary supplies in hand, Munzert and Moll gathered five youth offenders who needed to fulfill community service hours and

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tackled the graffiti problem in a morning.

Moll and Munzert also spoke with Waste Management, which agreed to haul away the garbage in the alley free of charge.

“After all these years I’ve been here, this is the first time anyone’s taken an interest to clean up this mess,” said Murray. “To me, it was a step in the right direction — the police department telling the businesses they would like to work with us. I thought it was a great thing to happen.”

Tarantini said the officers’ work is “good for the community as a whole.”

“I appreciate their time and effort to get the area cleaned up with the use of the youth offenders,” he said. “We got this problem solved and it’s just good to keep the place cleaned up.”

Business owners are now working with the Cape Coral Community Redevelopment Agency and other officials to install lighting in the alleyway. Also, officers have begun patrolling the area regularly, said Murray.

Erasing the eyesore was simply a testament to what can be accomplished when law enforcement and the community work together, said Moll, adding he and other district officers are already addressing other public safety issues regarding traffic, parking and pedestrian safety in the area.

“This was easy to tackle,” said Moll. “If this is an indication of the reception and help that we’re going to get from the business community, we can accomplish much more.”



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