

A CASE STUDY IN COMMUNITY ACTION

THE TAKOMA ORANGE HATS:

Fighting Drugs and Building Community in Washington, D.C.

SUZANNE GOLDSMITH



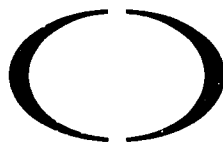
The Communitarian
NETWORK

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A QUIET CONTEST AT GEORGIA AND ASPEN

It's 9:30 on a cold December Saturday night in northwest Washington, D.C. and something suspicious is happening—or trying to happen—near the corner of Aspen Street and Georgia Avenue. A young man in his late twenties or early thirties is standing at the curb in front of a brick apartment complex, checking his watch and glaring uneasily at a small cluster of people across the street. He leans out to look up and down Georgia Avenue, then turns and paces for a few moments. He looks again at the group. There are eight of them, mostly middle-aged, men and women, some white, some black, all wearing bright orange baseball caps. A woman in the group stares back at the man; others glance at him more discreetly. The young man checks his watch again, then disappears into the apartment building. A few minutes later, he is back at the curb, nearly a block away.

“What's he up to?” asks one woman, the one who stared, with an edge of irritation in her voice.

“We saw him last week,” says one of her companions. “Remember? He kept walking up and down, up and down.”

“Come on—Thunderbird, Sergeant Major,” says the first woman. “Let's check out the mail detail.” Four of the group walk down to the corner of Georgia and Whittier—site of a public mailbox—where they can have a better view. Along the way, they encounter a woman staggering up Georgia, reeking of perfume and booze. Although it is well below freezing out,

her legs and her midriff are bare. Her face is covered with scars, and she is missing several teeth.

“How can I get me one of those orange hats?” she calls out.

“Walk with us,” answers one of the men. The group moves on up the street, as the prostitute stands watching.

THE TAKOMA COALITION

At Whittier and Georgia, the group continues watching the man across the street. After 20 minutes more of pacing, watch-checking, looking up and down the street and glaring at the group, he disappears again. This time he doesn't return.

The orange-hatted citizens who keep watch at the southeast corner of Aspen Street and Georgia Avenue are not auxiliary police officers. They carry no weapons and little equipment. Some are retirees, well into their sixties, while others are younger people, with full-time day jobs. They are men and women, married and single, black, white and Hispanic. They are not paid, they operate with little institutional support, and they incur almost no costs. All they really have in common is the neighborhood they live in, and a desire to keep it safe. For more than four years, they have walked the streets at night, facing down drug dealers and prostitutes, keeping the streets they live on from open drug selling and prostitution—and from the violence, theft, and disorder that accompany such illicit markets.

This group, the Takoma Coalition, is one of more than 200 citizen antidrug patrol groups in Washington, D.C. On the Saturday night described above, the young man who glared at them

from across the street was the only person the group encountered who may have been a drug dealer; the drunken woman was the only likely prostitute who crossed their path. But it wasn't always that way. Five years ago, the spot where they meet at the corner of Aspen and Georgia was headquarters for a quite different group: young men in dark clothes and hooded sweatshirts who flagged down cars and sold drugs directly from the street. The pay phone on the corner was in constant use as drivers stopped at the curb and placed calls to drug sellers in the apartment building across the street. Women in outlandish and provocative attire strolled up and down the block—even, in one case, beckoning from a street-level window—calling and whispering to potential customers. The parking lot and lobby of a hotel on the corner were the site of great activity—with drivers of cars with license plates from as far away as New York and New Jersey stopping and going in for just a few minutes before returning to their cars and driving away.

The sudden appearance in the late 1980s of a drug and prostitution market on a formerly quiet stretch of Georgia Avenue was like an infection in the middle of what had long been a stable, working- and middle-class neighborhood of black and white homeowners along the side streets feeding into Georgia Avenue. Burglaries, vandalism, and car break-ins sharply increased. Litter was everywhere. People were afraid to walk their dogs, and took to driving the two or three blocks to the local Safeway for groceries. Casual curbside conversation became a rarity as residents chose to spend as little time as possible outside the protection of their homes.

The story of how a small group of determined citizens succeeded—peacefully—in reclaiming the streets of their neighborhood from a criminal occupation and restoring the sense of safety and civility that is a necessary condition for community life demonstrates the potential power of citizen action in the face of seemingly intransigent problems. It is a story about citizens taking risks to fight for a sense of dignity and ownership in the place where they live. Their efforts succeeded not only in driving drug dealers from the neighborhood, but also in providing

a model for other groups and spawning a host of other community-building activities in surrounding neighborhoods.

What's more, members of the Takoma Coalition and other neighborhood groups inspired by their example say that their efforts to combat crime have helped them begin to realize the promise of their diverse neighborhood by developing friendships they say would not have otherwise come to be, friendships that cut across barriers of race and age, friendships that make them feel more secure and welcome in their own community.

TUDOR HOMES AND TRIMMED HEDGES

Takoma Park, which straddles the dividing line between the District of Columbia and Maryland, was developed in the 1880s at the end of the streetcar line as a "healthful retreat" from a swampy, malaria-ridden city. Advertising brochures proclaimed it as a haven for middle-class people: bankers, lawyers, even shop clerks. "All you need is a moderate income," claimed the developer. When the proliferation of automobiles increased access to farther suburbs with more space and fancier homes—the houses in Takoma Park are generously proportioned but plain—some of the houses became rental properties and the residents became more economically diverse. It has always been, however, in the main, a community of working- and professional-class homeowners.

The corner of Georgia and Aspen is a relatively quiet spot. There are no shops or other businesses at this intersection except for a hotel—the Walter Reed Convenience Motor Inn—which flies a tattered banner advertising a special winter rate of \$34.95 a night and an all-you-can-eat lunch for \$4.95.

East of Georgia Avenue, a central business artery of northwest Washington, the streets become narrow, quiet, and residential. The large, single-family homes along Aspen have generous front porches and small side and rear yards, many of which have carefully trimmed hedges and are in the main well-kept. So are the small apartment buildings on Butternut and the somewhat grand, Tudor-style houses on 8th and 9th Streets, roads that run parallel to Georgia. Whittier Street, while a little scruffier, still has the look of a neighborhood populated by striving homeowners.

On the west side of Georgia, the Aspen Court apartment complex, with seven buildings connected by paths, is not fancy but not rundown either, and in the morning groundworkers can often be seen picking up trash in the bushes and grass around the buildings. Just to the north on Georgia looms the enormous Walter Reed Army Medical Center complex.

This is not a neighborhood in which a daytime pedestrian would be fearful. But even today, a close observer can see signs of the neighborhood's recent troubles. The pay phone on the corner has been vandalized, and its metal cord hangs limply down, receiverless. Outside the motor inn, on a waist-high brick ledge are mounted two rows of short metal spikes, designed to keep loafers—or worse—from sitting there. A small house on Aspen has a big sign over the door: NO LOITERING. At the corner of Georgia and Whittier, an abandoned house stands boarded up and peeling, a weathered FOR SALE sign in the yard. And inside the Motor Inn, the cashier sits quietly, looking bored, behind a wall of bulletproof glass.

There's no more blatant drug dealing at the corner of Georgia and Aspen. But signs are everywhere of how close this neighborhood stands to criminal threats and disarray.

A SUDDEN OCCUPATION

“It wasn’t like what you read about in some of these other areas,” says longtime Aspen Street resident Don Young, 63,¹ describing the problems he began to notice in the neighborhood in the mid- to late 1980s. “We didn’t have any major or organized drug dealing. It wasn’t a major crime problem—but it was developing into one.”

Aspen Street neighbor Thomas Green first noticed the change when he was out walking his dog early in the mornings. “We couldn’t prove. . . that this person or that person was pushing drugs. But it was obvious that these people were up to no good, they’re out there at all hours of the night, cars are stopping by, they’re chatting with the cars. . . . You go out there 6:30 in the morning and they’re going back and forth on the street. You know they’re not out there for their health.”

Why did drug dealers choose this area for their illegal activities? No single factor is to blame. Police point out that stretches of Georgia Avenue to the north and south were already troubled and that this quiet residential enclave was simply getting some of the overflow activity. Residents blame the hotel, which each year seemed to have a new manager, all of whom turned a blind eye to suspicious activity in the parking lot and lobby. For a time, neglectful management of the Aspen Apartments across the street was also a problem, they say; tenants who engaged in illegal activity were not evicted, the grounds were not kept up, and the maze of paths between the buildings offered many places to consummate transactions initiated curbside.

1. For safety and privacy, Young's name, and all of the names of the Takoma Park residents quoted in this study, have been changed.

Young and Green—and their wives, Mary Young and Sarah Green—are good friends who have lived in the neighborhood almost three decades and have raised their children there. At 63, Don Young recently retired from the federal government police. Prior to that, he put in 20 years in the Marines, where he attained the rank of Sergeant Major. He and Mary, a former hospital technician, raised five children on Aspen Street; now they care for Mary's ailing mother, who lives with them, and for an infant grandchild that their daughter drops off each morning on the way to work.

The Greens are both in their fifties and still working. Thomas Green is a personnel and staffing specialist with the Defense Department, and Sarah teaches third grade. Their daughter is away at veterinary school; their son, an artist, lives at home and is studying for a graduate degree. The Greens came to Aspen Street in 1967 and have been deeply involved in the neighborhood ever since.

The Youngs and the Greens have seen many changes along Aspen Street and in the surrounding area since they arrived in 1963 and 1967, respectively. They were among the earliest black families to move to Aspen. Both couples, however, say they always felt at home in the neighborhood and did not feel excluded because of their race. As older white residents passed away or sold their homes and retired to other places, the balance shifted and the neighborhood became predominantly black. In the 1980s, young white couples began moving to the neighborhood, creating a mix that seems to have stabilized, at least for the moment.

Longtime residents like the current mix, but they remember with nostalgia a time when there was less mobility, when everyone in the neighborhood knew one another and kept an eye on each other's children.

"It was a nice neighborhood," says Don Young. "The kids would go out and talk and play together. They were in the boy scouts, all those activities. We knew all our neighbors."

"I knew everybody from here to Georgia Avenue because I used to collect for the Heart Association," says Sarah Green. "Between here and Sixth Street also. . . . We knew just about everybody in these square blocks. We knew when somebody was here who didn't belong here. I would usually go out and greet whoever moved in and introduce our children to each other. I'm just that type of person. I don't need any strangers around."

Both couples played a leadership role in neighborhood activities, which through the decades have reflected the changing concerns of urban residents. In the 1970s, Thomas Green organized a petition drive to have signs posted on the street preventing employees and visitors to nearby Walter Reed Hospital from monopolizing the parking spaces. There were other traffic-related activities over the years, including a successful effort to have a stoplight installed at Georgia and Aspen.

In the early 1980s, residents of Aspen formed a Neighborhood Watch group with help from the police department. The goal was to prevent burglaries and other crime on the street by reporting all suspicious activities to the police. Thomas Green became a block captain.

Keeping an eye on the neighborhood is second nature to these longtime homeowners. Don Young often sits on his porch in the evenings and keeps watch, taking special care to keep an eye on the houses of neighbors who have let him know they are out of town. The Greens and the Youngs have keys to one another's homes and those of other neighbors as well. During an afternoon interview with the Greens, they got up more than once to check the source of noises in the street and when a fire engine pulled up in front of a neighbor's home they got on the phone to find out what was happening and if there was anything they could do to help.

When the Youngs and the Greens discovered that open drug selling was taking place on Georgia Avenue within sight of their homes, however, they decided some action would be needed beyond the Neighborhood Watch approach of asking neighbors to “keep an eye out.” Although Washington, D.C. has the highest ratio of police personnel to population in the country, the murder rate in 1991 was 81 deaths per 100,000 residents, compared with 31 per 100,000 in New York City (*The Heritage Foundation Policy Review*: “D.C. Blues: The Rap Sheet on the Washington Police.” Winter 1993). Washington residents know what drug markets can lead to. Much of the violence in the city springs from drug market turf wars—and innocent citizens can easily get caught in the crossfire.

In 1989, shootings were not yet a part of life in the Aspen Street area, but a quarter-mile to the north on Georgia Avenue gunfire was heard on a weekly basis. The Greens, Youngs, and others began a series of informal meetings to talk about the growing crime problem.

“The meetings weren’t frequent in the beginning,” says Don Young. “We would just discuss what was going on. Discuss the change in the neighborhood, the problems with prostitutes up in the hotel on the corner. . . . And then a month or two later, some other neighbors would become concerned, that may not even have been at that first meeting. They would meet and discuss what was going on. And a few months later, the same thing would happen.”

For a while, the meetings were simple information-sharing sessions. A representative of the local police district’s community relations office attended at least one of the meetings and gave the concerned residents what they considered “lip service” about increased attention to problems in the neighborhood. If police were targeting the area for enforcement, it wasn’t working; there was no change.

One day, someone saw an article in the paper about citizen antidrug patrols and decided to invite organizer James Foreman to come to one of their gatherings.

ENTER “KNEE CAP”

James Foreman is a former union organizer and high school basketball coach who works days in the customer service department of a Washington department store. His nights, however, he spends spreading the gospel of citizen patrolling. He and his neighbors in the Fairlawn section of Anacostia started the city’s first citizen antidrug patrol in response to the encroachment of drug sellers in their quiet neighborhood, which had for many years been an oasis of peace in troubled southeast Washington. Wearing signature orange hats, the group set out to patrol their own streets at night—and, with some help from a local police officer who supported their efforts, they succeeded in driving away the drug dealers and the disorder the dealers had brought. Along the way, they refined the techniques that have become central to “orange hating.”

The group is still active, but Foreman—who goes by the street name “Knee Cap”—carved a new mission for himself: showing others in the city how to follow Fairlawn’s lead. He formed the Metro Orange Coalition and began visiting other community groups and exhorting them to start their own citizen patrol groups. With donated funds he bought a few pieces of equipment to lend to new groups when they were starting up. Foreman even began wearing a beeper so that groups who needed help and advice could contact him quickly. The police department agreed to support his efforts by referring him to groups that needed his assistance, and by committing itself to work with those groups.

Today, Foreman—who is not paid for this work—spends nearly every night on the streets or in the living rooms of Washington residents, meeting with people to explain how citizen patrols work, walking with new groups to help them get started, or simply driving around, checking in with the groups that are on the street. Of the more than 200 Orange Hat patrols currently active in D.C., every one got started with the help of James Foreman.

Police Captain Claude J. Beheler, once an officer in Foreman's home district who helped the Fairlawn Coalition get started and now commander of the Traffic Enforcement Branch, is an enthusiastic supporter of the Orange Hats. "This is something that costs nothing," he told the *Washington Times*. "It was just people getting together and participating with police. It's amazing how something so penniless, cost-wise, could grow to be something so big."

Most of the members of the Takoma Park Coalition remember their first meeting with Knee Cap. Foreman was "a charismatic speaker," according to George Stern, who lives two doors down from the Greens on Aspen. "He can really get people on their feet."

Foreman made a rousing speech to the group that ignited their ambition and increased their fears. He told the gathered neighbors that they *could* stop the drug dealing in their neighborhood; and he said that if they did not, their problems would soon be much worse than having to take alternate routes to the supermarket. He talked about drive-by shootings. About young children recruited into the drug trade. About what it is like to visit one's own children—or grandchildren—in the graveyard.

HOW IT WORKS

Foreman described how an Orange Hat patrol works. Its purpose, he said, is not to frighten or confront drug dealers and prostitutes, but to scare away their market. A citizen patrol can make a neighborhood an inhospitable place for selling drugs simply by letting skittish buyers know they are being watched.

Police tend to focus on catching drug dealers, which is helpful but ultimately ineffective in breaking up a drug market. If the location is lucrative—that is, if buyers come there looking for drugs—there always seem to be more dealers to take the place of those who have been arrested. On the other hand, if buyers are afraid they will be exposed or arrested if they go to buy drugs in a particular spot, they quickly choose to buy their supply elsewhere, and the drug dealers are forced to move on.

By acting—or simply by appearing to act—in concert with the police, a citizen patrol can reduce the viability of a location for drug dealers by scaring away their customers. It does not stop drug dealing, Foreman emphasizes, but drives it elsewhere—or forces dealers to switch to an underground referral market, which is not accompanied by the same degree of street crime and violence.

Foreman gave a quick primer in the tools and the tricks of the trade. Neon orange hats give the groups visibility, unity and a quasi-official look. Some groups also wear orange T-shirts or jackets. Two-way radios allow them to communicate with one another for safety—or with a person who remains at home near the phone to call for help if needed. Radios also create the perception that the group is in constant communication with the police. This is especially true if a police officer walks with the group from time to time and stops to visit them regularly.

Good relations with police are important, said Foreman, because their presence—even if it is only occasional—gives the group credibility in the eyes of dealers and buyers. Patrollers can also assist police by giving them information. They carry pads and pens and write down the license plate numbers of cars they believe are in the neighborhood for the purpose of buying or selling drugs or hiring prostitutes. They pass these numbers to the police, who can use the information in investigations. More importantly, drug buyers who see them writing down tag numbers are frightened away.

Orange Hat members also bring video cameras, still cameras and binoculars and train them on the suspected drug dealers. It doesn't matter, says Foreman, whether there is tape in the recorder or film in the camera. What is important is giving the impression that they are conducting official surveillance.

For their own safety and the security of their homes and families, Foreman instructs Orange Hat group members to use pseudonyms or "street names" to protect their identities when patrolling. But as long as members do not confront drug dealers directly, he says, they do not need to be too worried about their safety. To his knowledge, there has never been a serious incident of retributive violence against a member of an Orange Hat patrol.

"Guys who deal drugs are more afraid of the people than the people are of them," says Foreman. "They will never, never defend their turf. . . . We have never had a member of an Orange Hat group even get in a fight."

Foreman only attended one living-room meeting with the Takoma Park residents. Next time they got together, he told them, it should be on the street. They decided to get right to work.

WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY?

Is all this prying legal? According to community antidrug strategy expert Roger Conner, there is no constitutional barrier to any of the activities conducted by groups like the Takoma Coalition. Conner is director of the American Alliance for Rights & Responsibilities, a public-interest law group, and coauthor of a book outlining practical strategies for fighting drugs called *The Winnable War: A Community Guide to Eradicating Street Drug Markets*. Conner also lives five blocks from Aspen Street and started his own Orange Hat group with help from Knee Cap and members of the neighboring Takoma Park Coalition.

The right to privacy, says Conner, exists only to protect citizens from the government, not from one another. Citizens who *publish* information about drug activity observed on the street may be open to libel actions—but only if the information they publish is not true. “Truth is always a defense to libel,” says Conner.

Furthermore, Conner points out, any and all information gleaned on the street may legally be passed to police, who may not act on that information if it is not supported by their own investigation.

“As far as picture taking,” says Conner, “the issue is, do you have a reasonable expectation of privacy? You do not have a reasonable expectation of privacy if you carry on a transaction on a public street, on the public pavement, or in any place that can be seen from a public place. So I can take a picture of it, I can write it down, I can use my binoculars. If it can be seen from the sidewalk, you have no reasonable expectation of privacy.”

GETTING STARTED

"No group is ever ready. Because the fear is in there. But if they get 10, 12 people, we can go with that. We know it'll grow." —Knee Cap

"That first night, I was scared, I must admit," says Sarah Green, remembering the October night in 1990 when the group first took to the street. "I don't know how Thomas felt, but I was afraid. The unknown is always fearful. But we got out there, and we had about 40 people out there. . . . Knee Cap was there and he brought other Orange Hat groups out with us to help us get a feeling of belonging to something and that helped a lot when I saw all those people.

"It tapered off, but that first night it was inspiring to see all those people come out to help."

The group was also joined that night, and on many succeeding nights, by police officer Mark Marshall. Marshall didn't make arrests that night; he simply walked with the group. But he was enthusiastic about their efforts, and his presence showed the drug dealers and others on the street that this group was working with the police.

Knee Cap had brought two video cameras and tripods, which they set up at Georgia and Aspen, and he had also brought them walkie-talkies. The radios crackled dramatically as they walked in groups of four or five around the neighborhood, reporting their location to one another as they went. For safety, they called each other by the street names they had chosen before setting out. Thomas and Sarah Green were Fisherman and Pisces, after his passion and her Zodiac sign; Don Young called himself Sergeant Major.

Others who were there that first night included George and Elise Stern, a white couple in their forties who had recently moved to the neighborhood and who worked out of their Aspen Street home as a builder and a writer; they called themselves Gonzo and Deep Freeze. Jaime Velez, an assistant high school principal who was born in Argentina and lived on Butternut Street took the name Termite; and Patty Walker, a single white woman in her fifties who worked for the Army Corps of Engineers was Twinkletoes, a nickname she had been given in childhood when the Planter's warts on her heels made her walk on her toes. Others in the group took names that were exotic or that reflected their jobs and personalities: Thunderbird and Queen Firebird, Roadhog and Roadmap, Chalkdust, Bunny Rabbit. The names added a special thrill and a sense of unity—a secret shared only within the group.

The area they patrolled encompassed nine blocks, extending from Butternut in the north to Whittier in the south, and from Georgia Avenue west to Piney Branch east. Occasionally they stopped and stood in front of a house on Whittier they suspected was being used to sell drugs.

As they walked around the neighborhood, they saw that they were noticed. Cars with out-of-state tags and cardboard temporary plates (which are often used by criminals because they are easily stolen and hard to trace) would slow down to check out the patrollers as they cruised by. Some would drive around the block and come back once or twice—and then disappear. Out on Georgia Avenue, group members wrote down the tag numbers of the cars that headed into the hotel parking lot and then, quickly, back out again. A group went to stand on the same corner as a cluster of young men who had congregated there; after a long, chilly silence, the young men moved on to stand somewhere else, out of sight.

Sarah Green says that the immediate response to the patrol group energized her that night, and still motivates her, four and a half years later. "It's kind of like the rush that I get

when I sit down to work a crossword puzzle,” she says, with an excitement that could only be appreciated by another avid puzzler. “I can’t wait to get into that crossword. . . . It’s something that comes over me that I can’t describe the feeling. And that’s how I feel when I get out on the street. I don’t care how tired we are. When it’s time to go out, the adrenaline starts flowing.”

That first night, the group stayed out from seven until midnight. And, euphoric with the sense of their own strength and potential power, they came out again the following night. There had been no violent incidents; their presence seemed to have an effect; and they enjoyed the excitement and the camaraderie. They came out every night that week, and the next week, and the next.

TOUGHING IT OUT

“In a way it’s kind of a battle. Whose street is it, ours or theirs? And if we’re not there, it’s gonna be theirs.” —Patty Walker

The novelty wore off quickly, however. Few in the group realized what they were getting themselves into when they first agreed to join the patrol. George Stern—the builder who lives on Aspen with his wife and his parents-in-law—chuckles, remembering: “We said we were willing to participate once a month,” he says. But while results were quick in coming—after only a few weeks it appeared to them that drugs and prostitution on the street were dramatically reduced, and the number of out-of-town cars passing through the hotel parking lot was way down—it was also clear that these positive results were limited to the time when they were patrolling. After they went home, activity resumed.

It was obvious that to create an environment that was truly inhospitable to illegal activity, the Orange Hats would have to be out on the street every night. Those whose commitment was less than total quickly fell out.

“A lot of people, they got nervous,” says Don Young. “And they just stopped. But we maintained a good nucleus of about 20-some-odd people who would come out regularly. As long as the drug dealers were there, we stayed there. . . . We stayed out till well after midnight. As long as they stayed out on the corner, we stayed. This went on for at least two years. Every night. Come rain, snow, sleet, what-have-you.”

Not every member of the group came out every night, but many of them came out five or six nights a week. They established a telephone tree to facilitate communications. And they let each other know when they could and could not come, to ensure that a critical mass was present on the street each night. It was important not to let up the pressure—and as it became clear to the dealers that the group was serious, they answered with their own kind of pressure.

“There were some incidents,” says George Stern. “A rock-throwing incident, a push and shove type of thing, there were lots of those.”

Often the group would point out troublemakers to police, and when they acted on the information, hostility increased. “The police would challenge them: frisk them; harass them,” explains Don Young. “The drug dealers, they knew we were pointing them out. They knew. The next night they would come by and make a comment. ‘You put the police on us. You better watch it.’”

“I was down there one night,” says Henry Stevens, Stern’s father-in-law, “and a guy came by and talked about getting a shotgun and blowing us all off the corner.”

Young men on the street flipped the finger and shouted names. “Pumpkin Heads,” they sneered. Groups in cars would shout obscenities as they whizzed by. A woman lifted up her dress and “mooned” them. Don Young’s son came home agitated from school one day, reporting that another boy had instructed him to tell his father to “watch out.”

One night, a rock was thrown from a moving car. It didn’t hit anyone; rather, it smashed the window of a car parked at the curb.

Some in the group were frightened, and the threatening incidents drove away the “dabblers” who patrolled only occasionally. Those who stayed with it took the risks seriously but felt protected by their numbers.

“I never wear my [orange] hat on my way to the corner,” says Jaime Velez, the assistant high school principal from Butternut Street. “One person can be a victim very easily. But there’s a strength in numbers. Not physically, but the eyes and ears.”

To discourage physical attacks, the group adopts a staunchly non-confrontational stance.

“When you look for trouble,” says Thomas Green, “you will find trouble. We emphasize the importance of not challenging them. We don’t want any confrontation. We don’t want to argue with people who come by and curse us out, we just stand and listen. If they compliment us, fine, if they don’t, no big thing.”

“Sometimes you gotta eat crow,” says Velez, who once had a hot drink knocked out of his hand by the enraged owner of a car whose license plate number he was writing down. He calmly handed over the sheet of paper, avoiding a fight. “They want to intimidate you. Taunt you. And you don’t know what they got in the car. They could blow you away. . . .

“But this is a bunch of unarmed people with a hat on. There is a strength about that. If that gets broken, and you plant this fear factor, the whole thing may crumble. I’m glad that nothing has happened.”

George Stern describes one occasion when he felt physically threatened. That night he had brought out a still camera. He was using the telephoto lens to watch a suspected dealer across the street.

The man he was watching suddenly ran across the street and began threatening Stern directly, spitting the words into his face. Stern felt sure he would have to fight and wondered if the man was armed. The group circled around them, however, and his challenger backed down and stalked away.

“I’ve been out there for three years,” he says, “and never had a response like that. People have hollered, there are times when you feel a sense of vulnerability, watching every car that goes by, watching everybody’s hands, making sure their hands stay on the wheel, but I never felt like that before.”

He adds, “I don’t think there was anything more provocative that any of us did than bringing that still camera down. The video camera was a little more neutral because the camera was set up on a tripod; it was there passively.”

Even now, after four years of patrolling and a radical decrease in the amount of criminal activity on the street, the Takoma Coalition Orange Hats still sometimes feel vulnerable. I watched one night as a group member ducked behind a public mailbox, pretending to take cover from a hostile-looking dealer. They take precautions: they walk one another home; and

on each occasion that I patrolled with the group, they remained on the corner after breaking up for the night, watching me until I was safely inside my car.

They combat their fear—and disarm their adversaries—by being unwaveringly friendly and polite. Whether a pedestrian stops to say hello, reels by in a stupor, or stalks by haughtily, they are careful to part their circle and make room on the sidewalk and to greet each person who passes, usually by name. Often they hold long, cordial conversations with young men whom they know to be dealers, inquiring about families and jobs, exchanging pleasantries.

In four years of patrolling, no member of the Takoma Coalition has ever been harmed.

OBSTACLES—AND A FRUSTRATING LACK OF SUPPORT

Officer Marshall, the police officer who spent so much time walking with the Takoma Orange Hats when they were starting out, was eventually reassigned to another beat, and the group found that the response of other police officers to their efforts was far less encouraging.

Thomas Green expresses frustration at trying to get police to enforce standards of decency he considered central to maintaining a civil neighborhood. He describes the police reaction to his complaint one night that a man had urinated on the street in full view of the group, which included women. When an officer stopped by shortly afterward, Green asked him to admonish the man. The officer refused, claiming there was nothing he could do, as he had not observed the act. “Can’t you at least say something to him?” Green asked. “If I do that,” the officer replied, “I’ll probably have to shoot him.”

“Now, urinating in public is not something that we accept,” says Green. “But that was the kind of support that we got from some of the officers. They just didn’t seem to care. They didn’t seem to have much of an interest in the community.”

Some citizen patrols report that their presence on the street encourages police to take a greater interest in their neighborhood. One police officer that I spoke with when he stopped to visit with the Orange Hats at Aspen and Georgia said he pays more attention to that area because of the Takoma Coalition. “They live here,” he said. “They know who belongs and who don’t belong. I’m not here every day. They heightened my attention to this area.” Indeed, police officers generally stop to talk with the group once or twice a night when they are patrolling. Still, most in the group feel that the police have done little to help them in their mission.

“We kept giving them these lists of tag numbers and gradually we came to realize that nothing was being done with them,” says Patty Walker.

D.C. Police Sergeant James Miller commands Sector Two of the Fourth Police District, which includes this neighborhood. Miller says it is true that sometimes police do not follow up on information provided by citizens, pointing out that tracing out-of-state licenses is time consuming, and requires the cooperation of the Department’s vice squad. “With the officers, [working with the Orange Hats] is a pain in the butt. Totally. They don’t want to be there. . . . Some do. And there are some that have a great working relationship. But as a majority attitude, I’d say it’s a negative one.”

Still, Miller keeps the Takoma Coalition’s patrol schedule pinned to the wall by his desk and tells officers to check in regularly with the group when they are out. Such communication is, in fact, required as part of the D.C. Police Department’s “community empowerment policing” policy.

Thomas Green points out that it is important not only for police to pay attention to street-level drug dealing, but to attend to a wide range of violations that, if unchallenged, broadcast a sense of disorder within a community. “Officers Marshall and Gross were the best,” he says. “If they saw people violating a law, they just didn’t look the other way. If they were illegally parked, they would approach them about that. If they were disturbing the peace, they would approach them about that. Some of the other officers would look the other way. They just didn’t seem to be that concerned about the fact that people were in violation of the law. They didn’t seem to realize that those are things that lead up to greater violations. If they can double park in areas up there and no one will say anything to them about it, well, the next time they are going to do something worse than double park. One thing leads to another. One violation leads to another.”

In the end, however, group members are resigned to the low level of assistance they get from police. “You can’t have enough cops,” says Jaime Velez. “People just have to get involved. There’s nothing better than people in an area to know what’s going on.”

IT’S NINE O’CLOCK—DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR NEIGHBORS ARE?

Getting more people in the neighborhood to help out, however, has been an ongoing challenge for the group. They are encouraged by the friendly waves, the words of support, the tooting horns as neighbors drive by them on the corner. But getting people to put on an orange hat and stand with them is something else entirely. They are keenly aware that at 15 active members and a total roster of about 40, they represent a tiny percentage of the residents in their nine-block area.

“A lot of people relate to us that they are glad to see us out there,” says Don Young. “They tell us now they can go to the Safeway without having their purses snatched. . . . And sometimes we would ask them, well, why don’t you come out? But they just say, ‘no way.’” He throws back his head and laughs.

Jaime Velez is angrier about his neighbors’ failure to help out. He is the only person on Butternut Street who participates. He describes bitterly how some people, taken with a romantic image of neighborhood vigilantism, come out once or twice and never return. “One lady down on the corner expressed a lot of interest,” he says. “She called everybody. She came out with the group a couple times, bought an orange hat and never was seen again. So we think when she goes for a drink with her social group she can show her hat and . . . I don’t know. It was a very quick flame. We never saw her again.”

Another woman—one who had never walked with the group—confronted Velez on the street one day after she had been mugged outside her home. “Where were you?” she demanded. “Where were you when I was mugged? I thought your group was out every night!”

“Where were *you*?” he rejoined, stunned. “Do you think I am out there working for you?”

“Some people, they think we just have a lot of free time,” he says. “They think that this is an adventure, that this is what we get high on. Meanwhile, she’s now trying to sell her house. . . . People have a lot of excuses. I’m not passing judgment. I think it’s very difficult to show up. It’s unusual—to stand on the corner on watch.”

“At first, we kept trying to get more people out,” says Patty Walker. “We put flyers in doors. We went door to door, talking to people, wearing our orange hats, trying to get them to come out.”

Once the group was approached by a resident of the Aspen Court Apartments—the buildings on Georgia Avenue where many of the drug dealers lived—who wanted to know more about getting involved. Filled with enthusiasm, a delegation went to visit her in her apartment, bearing flyers and instructions on how to start a citizen patrol, as well as invitations to join their own group. She thanked them, and they never heard from her again. “I think what she wanted was for us to patrol her building,” says Walker.

“Finally I guess we just realized that we had all the participation we were gonna get—the rest of them weren’t gonna come out no matter what we did. So in the last year and a half, two years, we haven’t had any meetings, campaigns, anything, we’ve just stuck with the group we have, and kept going out. And every once in a while we get to feeling like, gee, you know, there are other people that are benefiting from all this and they’re doing nothing. But we’re the ones who want it done, so we’re the ones who are going to do it.”

RAGE AND RESPONSIBILITY

What drove these people to undertake such a dangerous, time-consuming, and sometimes tedious activity? Each person has a different answer.

For Jaime Velez, the emotion that drives him is simple and strong. “Rage,” he says. “How dare you? A block from my house. How dare you sell drugs? Or urinate in public or

deface my neighborhood? How dare you? So it's anger. You get upset. And you realize police can't do it all. You can't go blaming them. So you take steps.

"It's also having a sense of pride in your own environment. Protecting the environment physically, aesthetically. Who's on the corner? What are they doing? Is it healthy? Someone is trying to inject a hypodermic needle right in the alley behind your house? It's not because you own a house, it's because you want to be able to step out and not see that."

For George Stern, joining at the start did not require any soul-searching. "Who wants to live down the street from a drug market?" he asks. And as far as staying with it, "Everybody knows if I don't go down there, this whole thing will collapse," he says. "And those who have put in a lot of time want to see it go on."

Elise Stern's father and mother came to live with the couple two years ago when her mother became ill and needed their care. Her father, Henry Stevens, says he joined the patrol to fulfill a family responsibility.

"I've never been as civic-minded as they are," he says. "I'm not an activist. But sometimes I see that George and Elise don't go because they are too overloaded with trying to help us, and I just feel that I should represent the house and the family. That's my way of contributing to the family."

For Patty Walker, it was a matter of ownership. Not real estate, but community ownership. "I wanted to do whatever we could do as citizens to keep the neighborhood from belonging—that's how I would put it—to these people who were hanging around in the streets, selling drugs or whatever they were doing. They were just kind of taking over the place, and I certainly didn't want that to happen."

Many in the group struggle to answer the question, “Why did you want to get involved in this?” They never really considered *not* getting involved. They point out that because they started their patrol before the neighborhood had been destroyed by crime, there was still something to save. It was their community. They felt they had no choice.

THE DEATH OF A NEIGHBOR

Three months after the group began patrolling, a young man who lived in the Aspen Court Apartments was shot to death, execution style—his body was found in an alley, riddled with bullets—just a few blocks north on Georgia Avenue. Group members read about the murder in the paper on a Sunday morning; several of them remembered talking to the young man the night before, just hours before he was killed. Sarah Green knew him from way back; she had been his teacher back in the third grade. All of the group members believed he was a leader in the drug trade in their neighborhood.

They had a theory about why he was shot. His business having been disrupted by their patrol, they thought, he had gone to try and sell drugs on another section of Georgia Avenue and had been killed for poaching on another dealer’s turf.

This violent murder was, to everyone in the group, a turning point, a moment of revelation. The shooting saddened and shocked them, but it also confronted them, more intimately than many of them had been confronted before, with the violence of the drug trade, its seductive power, and with their own potential impact as a group.

“I feel bad that a kid got shot,” says Patty Walker. “I feel bad that anybody would get shot. But I think it did take a negative influence out of the neighborhood. And I also had the

feeling that perhaps if we had not been standing on the corner perhaps he would not have got shot.”

FINDING COMMON GROUND

From an outsider's perspective, there is much that would seem to divide this group: they are black, white, Hispanic, married, single, working, retired, professional, blue collar, middle aged, and old (no one seems to be younger than 40). And yet it is obvious that they relish each other's company. Out on the corner, they spend most of their time talking not about drugs and violence but about children and grandchildren, vacations, newspaper articles and hobbies, and gossiping in friendly fashion about the neighbors. Conversations are free-flowing and casual, moving seamlessly from group discussions that involve everyone to intimate tête-à-têtes and back again. Night after night, they find things to talk about.

“We enjoy it,” says Patty Walker. “We may complain, oh it's cold out here or hot out here or I'm bored or I'd rather be doing something else, but I do think that we enjoy it. You talk, you see what's going on. In the course of all these years you've gotten to find out names and locations of everyone's children or grandchildren, how they're doing in school, where they're going to school. Things like that. So there's always, 'how's so and so doing?' 'Well, such and such.' Which I think is a good thing.”

“Our group is made up of people who. . . genuinely like each other,” says Don Young. “That's why we don't mind going out. It's something that just really developed. We have a lot in common: people that really enjoy fishing, people who do a lot of traveling.

“It took time for it to develop for everyone to become as close as we are. The first year or so, we were really business. But even at that, there was still a closeness; we were beginning to build a bond. And as time went on, that bond just became stronger and stronger. Now we go out there more or less just to meet!” At this, Young sits back in his chair and laughs.

I ask him whether there is any awareness of racial differences within the group. He laughs again. “No. I can say that unequivocally. There is none whatsoever.”

Others in the group respond the same way to questions about race relations within the group. They are surprised at the question; they have been connected to one another as neighbors and Orange Hat colleagues for so long that they have almost ceased to see one another as members of different racial groups. To them, race simply does not matter. “We are all equal on the corner,” says Sarah Green.

One person who addresses the issue of race directly is Henry Stevens. An elderly but spry white man who lived in all-white neighborhoods before coming to live with his daughter and son-in-law in Washington, he says orange hatting has given him his first chance to become friends with black people. “I haven’t, myself, spent a lot of time with the other races,” he says, “and consequently it’s been a new experience for me. Everyone in the neighborhood is fine, educated people and all-around good citizens.” He launches into a story about a fishing trip he took with Thomas Green—“the Fisherman.” He has also attended baseball games with the Greens and the Youngs. Membership in the Orange Hats gave him access to a diverse social network that has helped him to feel at home in his new city.

Jaime Velez says he has had friends of diverse racial backgrounds all his life, but still was surprised at how easily members of the Takoma Coalition got along, right from the start. He says it is because people have come together not to focus on race but on issues that they all

share. "I was amazed. Because it's a very integrated group. I mean, I'm the only Latino there, but it's mixed, black, white, and everybody's different, but there are certain things we have in common. A very strong sense of respect. I think it helps in feeling that you belong."

Velez finds in that feeling a source of strength. "It's liberating to go out and meet people and to know that your neighborhood is more than your house. That people are different, but that they have so much in common. That they are friends. And that would never happen if it wasn't for this. That's what makes me go."

THE SECRETS OF THEIR SUCCESS

Even with such strongly committed members, one might wonder how the group has managed to sustain itself over more than four years, especially in the face of widespread apathy from others in the neighborhood. Part of the reason may be found in the group's unique culture and a set of unwritten rules that work to prevent conflict and burnout and to boost the enjoyment that group members take from patrolling. The following factors emerged as common themes in interviews with members and from observation on the street:

No guilt. Many in the group say that one reason they continue to come out is that they know the others would not make them feel guilty if they did not. Nobody acts as if this were a desperate, life-or-death endeavor or as if a failure to appear is somehow a betrayal of the group.

"We always remind each other that you don't have to come out," says Don Young. "If you've got something to do, do it. Because you have a life outside of standing on the corner."

“No one is criticized for not coming,” says Patty Walker. “And the reason is because we feel that the group has held together pretty well throughout this time. And we don’t want to endanger that by picking on people who don’t show up. And I think it works.

“I’ve missed now for two or three weeks. But I don’t have to go out there feeling guilty. If I knew that I was going to face a lot of harassment the first night out there, I might not.”

No hierarchy. “We’re not organized, we’re closely knit,” says Don Young. In fact, the Takoma Coalition has no officers, nor even any acknowledged leaders. The lack of hierarchy is typical of Orange Hat groups. With hierarchy comes jealousy, power struggles, and resentment.

“One of the keys to our success,” says George Stern, “is that nobody’s ever said, I’m the premier or the pope or whatever. We maintain a healthy disrespect.”

Without a formal leadership structure, petty jealousies are less likely to develop, and all group members feel an equal personal investment. The Takoma Coalition sees no need for leaders.

Lack of hierarchy does not, however, mean there is a lack of structure. When the group makes a decision—usually by consensus, not by vote—systems are in place for notifying members who are not present. All it takes is for one person—any person—to make two phone calls to activate the telephone chain and keep open the flow of communication that is critical to the survival of any Orange Hat group.

No publicity. Unlike many citizen action groups, the Takoma Coalition doesn’t go in for a lot of fanfare and publicity. They shun the media, and although Foreman’s citywide coalition often holds rallies and other events to allow people from different Orange Hat groups to

meet and to draw attention to their successes, this group rarely participates. Members keep to themselves in a way that would appear clannish if they weren't also so welcoming to outsiders who seek to join with them. The group was slightly suspicious of this case study, and some members were reluctant to be interviewed—but they always welcomed my efforts to patrol with them at night.

Part of the group's desire to keep a low profile stems from their suspicion of politicians. They tell stories about candidates who came by to walk with them for a night, accompanied by reporters and TV cameras, and never returned or acknowledged them again. One politician who was running for reelection came to patrol with the group one night and passed out brand new, better quality radios. They experienced a momentary thrill: the city was finally helping them out with some new equipment! But as soon as the City Councillor left, her staff took the radios back. The group was left with a lingering resentment.

"It doesn't take much to turn us against you," says Thomas Green. "An official who comes by at election time, it must be for publicity. Don't use us to get into office. That's not what we're about."

"And they do come out of the woodwork at election time," Sarah Green chimes in.

Apart from their jaded attitude toward politicians who would capitalize on their efforts, the group has a practical reason for keeping a low profile.

"We rarely participate [in citywide Orange Hat meetings,]" says Patty Walker. "And the reason is, people think, if I've got another night to devote to this cause, I'll go to the street. We don't have any other spare time to go to the meetings or do this thing or the other."

Keep it simple. This is one group that does not have grand aspirations. Its goal—keeping drugs and prostitution out of their neighborhood—has never changed or expanded. Neither has its territory. Members don't proselytize, and they have never tried to expand their mission beyond keeping their few blocks of Washington, D.C. free of blatant drug selling and prostitution. They set a goal, and they stuck with it.

Neither does the group hold meetings, take votes, hold forums or do anything else that would take time away from the street. "We figure what time we can spare we give to patrolling on the street," says Patty Walker. "And so we don't have meetings. If anything needs to be discussed or taken care of we do it on the street."

A habitable spot. The corner of Aspen and Georgia is not a truly comfortable spot. The sidewalk is narrow, and there are no benches or other amenities. But there is a streetlight there, as well as a stoplight, and these days foot traffic is light. It doesn't feel like a dangerous spot. Its landscape—the disabled pay phone, a newspaper dispensing box, a trash can installed by the city after two years of letters from the group—these are the furnishings of what has become, for the Takoma Coalition, a kind of community living room.

When the group circles up on the corner of Georgia and Aspen, group members tend to stand in the same spots from one night to the next: Thomas Green with his back to the light pole and the newspaper box, Don Young with his back to the phone. Sarah Green puts her bag with styrofoam cups, a thermos of hot water and instant hot chocolate for everybody on top of the pay phone and when it's time to serve it up they all step over to a ledge on the side of the hotel that acts as a serving counter. This corner is a place they have come to feel at home.

Bonding rituals and traditions. While the group has no formal rituals, over time they have developed patterns, habits, and ways of relating to one another that seem to reinforce their sense of inclusion and cohesion.

Group members often use one another's street names even in casual conversation. Some whose friendships dated to before the group started to refer to one another by real names—but in many cases they had to struggle to remember the real names of those they knew from the street corner. Like a secret handshake or a password, these alternative names seemed to add a sense of belonging to something special. On occasion, the street names may even have served to blunt cultural differences. "If Termite called me up and said, 'Hey, Sarah, this is Jaime,' I don't think I'd know who it was at first," says Sarah Green. "I can't even pronounce it! But when he calls me, he says, 'Pisces? Termite.' Then I know who I'm talking to."

They have nicknames, as well, for some of the people and the places they encounter in their patrols—the "mail detail," for instance. One nighttime denizen of Georgia Avenue they call "Million Dollar Walk;" another is called "Camouflage," after her customary attire.

The group also looks forward to its annual backyard party. It's usually a potluck, although sometimes members do a fish fry—with those group members who like to fish providing the main course. Neighbors who do not participate in the patrol are also invited to attend, and there is usually a good turnout. Don Young speculates that coming to the annual party is one way others in the neighborhood seek to show their support for the Orange Hats and give them an emotional boost.

Even the small rituals of their nighttime forays play a role in fostering the group's sense of membership: mixing up the hot chocolate, walking one another home, etc. These expected, predictable and shared moments and habits make the activity pleasantly familiar, enhance

people's sense of comfort with one another, define the boundaries of their activities and give them a sense of inclusion and comfort. What's more, they provide a shared context that is a necessary condition for building friendships, friendships that serve to sustain the group.

Stay with what's possible. Finally, the Takoma Coalition recognized that people cannot keep patrolling every night for five hours for the rest of their lives. In the second year, they reduced their hours to two a night (from 8:00 to 10:00) and stopped patrolling on Sundays. The third year, they cut back to four nights a week. Today, they patrol from 8:30 to 10:00, two to three nights a week. There has been some rise in illegal activity on the nights that they are not out, but they feel they have reached a comfortable compromise between the perfect and the possible.

BEYOND FIGHTING DRUGS

"Success breeds more success. They usually go on to other things. Things they should have been doing in the community. Once they win a battle against what they thought was the baddest, meanest people in the world, people no one could stop, they feel unstoppable." —James Foreman

Is all of this activity only about fighting drugs? Across the city, Orange Hat groups report that what starts as an antidrug patrol often leads to other activities—some targeted at reducing crime, others at addressing other neighborhood issues. From beautification to human needs like homework assistance and escorts for the elderly, Orange Hat groups tend to acquire other interests. The Takoma Coalition is no exception.

Two Saturdays a year it sponsors a neighborhood cleanup. It was Thomas Green's idea. "He just said, 'You know, this neighborhood really has been looking raggedy—I think we

oughta get out,’” remembers George Stern. “‘Everybody bring a shovel and a rake. Weed whackers.’ So we set a date, and we did a spit-shine. It became a tradition.”

“We get out there early Saturday morning with our rakes and wheelbarrows and cutters and we literally clean this entire area, including the alleys,” says Thomas Green. “And we cut grass and rake leaves,” adds Sarah. “And some of those in the community who are too old to participate come out and bring us things to drink. One lady gives us money to buy hot chocolate. One guy came by and gave us a box of donuts. Most people come out and if they don’t clean anything but just in front of their house—we usually have pretty good participation from people who are non–orange hatters.”

Every season more people participate in the cleanup day. It’s fun, and some feel it does more than simply create a short-term improvement. Rather, it sets a standard for residents to live up to. The cleaning fever is contagious.

“I’ve noticed that if there’s a cleanup scheduled for Saturday the 15th, many of us will go out and make sure our space is clean a week beforehand,” says Patty Walker.

“We even have some folks who refused to participate in the cleanup day but who I have seen since then get out and rake leaves—folks who never raked leaves before,” remarks Sarah Green. “They cut grass, they clean up the strip. They are doing more cleaning lately than they have been the whole time they lived here.”

“I feel when you do things like that,” says Thomas Green, “when you maintain your property or to the point where you are cleaning other areas of the neighborhood—that other people get the hint and say, this is good for the community, I’m going to do more. There are people who will cut the grass and will not even do anything to the strip out front of the house.

The alley the same way. They say, well, that's the city's responsibility. But now rather than leave the trash in the alley and wait for the city, I go ahead and clean our alley. We try and encourage others to do the same, because the city just isn't able to do those things. They just don't have the manpower, the resources."

Green conducts a personal campaign to get neighbors to keep their porch lights on at night to deter crime, and most of his Aspen Street neighbors now comply.

Are other neighbors not involved in the Orange Hat patrol more vigilant as a result of the Orange Hats' success? "I think now more so than before we got started," says Green. "People are more apt to get involved. If they see something that looks rather suspicious, they're going to check it out. They're not just going to look at it and say, 'Well, that's what's happening,' and just close the doors and forget about it. I think now they will check out situations more than they would have."

INSPIRING OTHERS

Just as James Foreman and members of other Orange Hat patrols helped the Takoma Coalition get started, they have reached out a helping hand to other fledgling groups, offering advice, support, and inspiration. Just to the north of their area along Georgia Avenue, they assisted in the formation of the GFEDDs group (named for the streets in its membership area: Georgia, Fern, Elder, Dahlia, and Dogwood). The history of GFEDDs, which started with patrolling but quickly moved on to a range of other activities, shows that orange hatting, defined broadly, can address a range of neighborhood concerns, and can be adapted to meet the needs and utilize the strengths of varied communities.

Roger Conner lives on Elder Street, just east of Georgia and five blocks to the north of Aspen. For his book on fighting drugs, Conner had already done a good deal of research on citizen antidrug patrols and other grassroots strategies for fighting drug markets, when he became aware sometime in 1990 that drug dealing was a problem in his own neighborhood. The sound of gunfire on weekend nights was becoming a common occurrence. Conner and a neighbor decided to hold a meeting. A neighbor who owned a restaurant on Georgia Avenue opened up the shop on a Saturday afternoon, and Conner invited Knee Cap to attend.

“So we went to the meeting and I was delighted because there were like 11 people,” says Conner, describing the meeting, “and I thought, ‘man, this is great.’ But once we got started it turned out that eight of them were from the Takoma Coalition. They were wearing these orange hats, and it seemed like a cult. . . . Foreman said, we need to have a walk. We’ll start tomorrow night. And I said, ‘Don’t you think we ought to have a meeting, get people together first?’ And he said ‘No, no meetings. We go out on the street.’ And all the Takoma folks said, ‘That’s right, we did it. We went out every night and we got rid of the drug dealing.’

“We got swept along by their commitment and their clarity that this was the thing to do. Among all the bewildering array of options that might have been put in front of us, somebody put a simple, clear thing in front of us.

“So they gave us a flyer that they had used, and I modified it and made copies and started knocking on doors the next day. I found the first three people that first Sunday afternoon.” With Conner and his fiancée, Margaret Blair, the group numbered five.

“Some of the Takoma people came up that first night to swell our numbers and give us some reassurance that there was going to be more of us than there was of them. And when you’re first doing it it seems hopelessly quixotic and exotic and dangerous. But having these

other people with you who've already done it—you're joking and talking and feeling a little strange, you're all neighbors but you're just meeting for the first time, and you're thinking, what are we doing out here? Are we included or excluded? And is this a group? What's happening here? Having them around that first night was very important. Even doing the research for the book and with everything else that I knew, I don't believe that I would have started—I would not have walked out there that first night without them.”

After that first night, the Takoma Coalition never walked with the GFEDDs group, but the groups communicated on their radios each night. For five months, the GFEDDs walked every night. Conner was out six nights a week. The core was small—just three or four residents—but many people came out and walked occasionally. Like the Takoma Coalition, they were thrilled at their own success. Where gunfire had become a weekly occurrence, there was now almost none, and the large groups of teenagers that had congregated on the corner of Georgia and Fern had dispersed. Unlike the Takoma Coalition, the GFEDDs stopped patrolling after about five months.

Drug activity did not immediately return to its earlier level, but without the nightly patrol, the dealers and the problems they brought with them slowly began to return. Conner points to two factors that made it difficult for GFEDDs to sustain energy for patrolling. First, he notes, the group never found a comfortable spot—like Georgia and Aspen—in which to congregate and remain. The trouble spot in their neighborhood was the corner of Fern and Georgia, near a bar and restaurant called the Hummingbird that had a dangerous clientele. Neighbors suspected open drug dealing was tolerated inside the club, and before the patrol began there were gun battles outside the Hummingbird almost every weekend. Standing on that corner, the small band of GFEDDs patrollers felt threatened and exposed and so rather than try to occupy the corner they walked through the neighborhood, which spread their influence but made them

less effective at driving away the drug buyers who came to the Hummingbird and, at the same time, made socializing within the group more difficult.

Second, says Conner, the group was simply not as social as the Takoma group. “We didn’t have someone who wanted to be the life of the party to make it into a social event, the way the Takoma group does, in addition to being a quasi-law enforcement vigilante event. I think that’s the key transition for one of these groups that’s going to stay on—the patrol has to become a social event that people feel attracted to coming. It has to fill human needs to be part of a group.”

The GFEDDs did not disappear, however. Instead, they took legal action against the Hummingbird, initiating a civil suit claiming that the club violated the terms of its liquor license. In order to file the suit, it had to collect signatures from over half the registered voters in the immediate vicinity of the bar, which proved to be a Herculean task. The litigation dragged out for three years but was ultimately successful. The restaurant lost its liquor license, and the problems of drug selling and violence seemed to abate. After a year, the restaurant closed.

The GFEDDs turned to other activities as well. The group formed a neighborhood association that met monthly. Aware that children and elderly people had not been able to participate in the nighttime patrols, they now mount periodic daylight patrols on Saturday afternoons, a community-building and visibility gesture that draws as many as 25 people, many of them children. They have held neighborhood parties and a couple of alley cleanup days. And last Halloween, they organized a neighborhood Halloween party in which parent volunteers accompanied groups of children to designated participating homes to collect candy and then back to a party where children received GFEDDs Halloween posters with maps of the neighborhood and materials to paste on the posters, including Polaroid photos of themselves in cos-

tume. More than 60 children participated, many of them children who had never been allowed to go “trick-or-treating” before.

Recently, new violence erupted in the neighborhood with the arrival of a gang occupying the alley between Elder and Fern Streets. Gang insignia were scrawled on garages and young men dressed in black prowled the alley each night. An emergency meeting at Conner’s home drew more than 30 residents. The next morning, Conner found his tires slashed. He activated the Orange Hat phone chain, and neighbors responded immediately with a flood of telephone calls to City Councillors, police, local neighborhood commissioners, and the Mayor of DC. Within days, police responded to this “squeaky wheel” by sending an undercover vice squad to arrest the drug dealers in the alley, and followed up by assigning a foot patrolman and two bicycle cops to the area. The owners of two dilapidated garages the gang members had been ducking into for shelter responded—the first by sealing his garage and the second by destroying his. The gang disappeared.

“Orange hatting is like Johnson grass,” says Conner. “Where I grew up, Johnson grass, the roots were always there. And when the environmental conditions are right, the plant comes up. And you can’t kill it. It’s always there.”

“What happens is that people meet each other—just the simple act of asking who each other are and exchanging a phone number. So that you can call them. Getting to know each other, getting to know who’s good and who’s bad and who lives in which house, and which kids belong to which parents, and what the phone numbers are and what your history is, that is the building block of the capacity of a community to respond to any threat.”

Alpha McPherson is one of those who has been with the group from the first night out. McPherson wrote a paper about the group’s early experiences for a college course he was

taking. In his paper he acknowledged that the group had been successful only in reclaiming the streets from the drug dealers for the time slot during which they patrolled; when they were not there the dealers returned. However, he found many other benefits in the experience.

“We have begun to foster good relations with the decent people in the community,” he wrote. “People walk up to us and tell us what a good job we are doing. Some come out and walk with us for a while during our patrol. We’ve had whole families join us for an evening. A mother and daughter walked with us. Husbands and wives stopped and spent time with us. People who own businesses near our area joined us for an evening too. Roger always has extra orange caps for our frequent honorary patrollers. We have a spirit now of turning to one another instead of on one another.”

McPherson and Conner, while not elected leaders, are the linchpins of the group. McPherson is black; Conner is white. Both speak compellingly of the contribution the group has made to fostering good relations in their diverse neighborhood.

Without groups that give people an opportunity to build trust in one another, says Conner, it is very difficult to overcome a sense of alienation between racial groups, even when people live on the same block. “The barrier is that you don’t know what the rules are. You don’t know what conduct is appropriate. . . and what you can complain about.”

Conner cites as an example an extremely loud summer daytime party that some of his black neighbors were holding. A newcomer to the community, he was irritated by the noise, but was uncertain whether it would be appropriate to complain. He was uncertain of the norms in this predominantly black neighborhood. “Is that what black people do? Is that behavior that is just acceptable in my neighborhood and it’s the dominant culture and I’m just supposed to live

with it? Or can I call the cops and have the cops come and tell them to turn the music down without having somebody laugh at me and be mad at me? I don't know."

Because of his Orange Hat-instigated friendship with McPherson, Conner felt comfortable asking him about the party. McPherson told him it was generally tolerated because it occurred only once a year. Having someone he could ask made Conner feel much more at ease.

"In a diverse neighborhood," he says, "you don't know what the rules are. And what's worse, you don't have a way to find out. Especially when you tend to retreat from the public space because you don't know what the rules are. People need to decide how to go about a diverse group of people living in a common space. Normally, you just have no way of doing this. But I feel I can ask Alpha or a dozen people in my neighborhood. I can be up front and honest with them and ask them a question like this without any fear that they're going to judge me to be a bad person for having raised that question."

In his paper, McPherson attributes the sense of mutual respect between all members of the group, black and white alike, to the enormity of the challenge they face together.

"Groups like this," he wrote, "immediately learn to respect each member as equals regardless of race, color, national origin, or status.

"The fear of the streets and street violence hastened our group to bond fast and tight. We bonded in one night. . . . Internal conflict did not exist within our group. And I can only attribute that to the nature of our group interest. Already, there was conflict swirling around us from the drug dealers and users. We never had time to focus upon anything but unity and togetherness."

FEELING AT HOME IN YOUR OWN NEIGHBORHOOD

In the end, perhaps what is most important in keeping the GFEDDs and the Takoma Coalition involved in patrolling and other activities over the long haul is the way it makes them feel about the community they live in. In a racially diverse community people are not always able to see what they have in common until some external purpose that they share and some common activity offers them an opportunity to grow comfortable with one another.

For Roger Conner, it has made all the difference. “For a white person living in a predominantly black neighborhood, just having people to your face be welcoming and generous gives you the feeling that you’re not an alien surrounded by people who dislike them,” he says.

And for Jaime Velez, an activity like orange hatting is essential for creating a sense of community in an urban neighborhood. “I don’t know about the suburbs, but in the cities, people are on the go. They’re behind closed doors. But this is basic—who lives where, and so how is so-and-so? How is the family?

“Otherwise, what is neighborhood? Is it a nice front yard? There are many people who have been here for ages that are locked behind their doors, or they just drive to the front of their house and walk in. You never even know if they have legs. They always are in their car. And I don’t want to know what people are doing, I’m not nosy, but I want to feel that this is my neighborhood. And this makes you feel like, I know people. I know who they are. They live in my neighborhood.”

THE FUTURE

Will the Takoma Coalition ever stop patrolling? Will a day come when they no longer need to spend their evenings guarding their streets from crime and violence?

"Sometimes I find myself wondering where will it all go," says Patty Walker. "For how many years will it continue? I never would have thought we would be standing out there four years. . . . And I wonder how many more years I'm going to be out there. Yet I'm one of those who has the feeling that if we don't stay out there on the corner, they, the big they, are going to be standing on the corner."

"How would you feel if you stayed in this neighborhood and were standing out there till the end of your days?" I ask her.

"I'd just accept that that was what living in this neighborhood is all about," she said.

Thomas and Sarah Green are hopeful that the drug problem in America will run its course, and that they will not have to spend their old age standing under a street lamp on the corner of Georgia and Aspen. "I don't see myself, 80, 90 years old, having to go out on the corner," says Thomas.

"However," Sarah jumps in. "I do see our group staying together. Orange Hats may not be patrolling, but as long as our friends, the core group is here, we will always be doing something together."

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