

Stretching the Long Arm of The Law

How Umatilla County's growing Neighborhood Watch Program is stamping out crime in rural Oregon

A decade ago, the Dixie Chicks released their fourth album, *Wide Open Spaces*, which quickly propelled the all-girl trio to the top of the billboard charts and, a year later, won a Grammy for best country album. In the title song, vocalist Natalie Maines sings of “a place out west,” of the yearning to explore and to discover the American Dream. These lyrics echo sentiments that have remained engrained in Americans for centuries.

From 1843 until the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, more than a half-million pioneers migrated west in search of land and opportunity. Even today, not far away from the smog and traffic congestion that plague many West Coast cities, there exists countryside with open sky and ample room to stretch one's arms. Umatilla County is such a place. Located in northeastern Oregon, along the Washington border, the county is the thirteenth largest in the state, and portions of it lie along the famed Oregon Trail. A largely agricultural region, Umatilla County is one of the nation's leading wheat and green pea producers. Tourism also is becoming increasingly important as more and more urbanites escape city life to commune with nature in Umatilla County's scenic Blue Mountains and paddle the Columbia and Walla Walla Rivers.

Unfortunately, the very qualities that make Umatilla County a great vacation destination and year-round home also attract an unwanted



Oregon's Blue Mountains overlook South west Rural Neighborhood Watch country

criminal element. With fewer than 73,000 residents, an expansive 3,231 square miles of land and several major highways crossing through, the county until recently was a haven for drug runners, methamphetamine lab operators, and other law-breakers who knew that their chances of being apprehended by one of the few local law enforcement officers were slim. “Most rural counties average 1.5 to 1.8 deputies per 1,000 people,” explained Umatilla County Sheriff John Trumbo. “We are at .036, and we've been at this level for about 12 years. The bad guys know we don't have 24-hour patrols.” Troubled, Sheriff Trumbo launched a crusade to reverse the crime trend, and in the less than three years that the county's Neighborhood Watch program has been running, the county has seen a dramatic drop in crime. A man with a mission faced with a budget deficit that prevented him from hiring more

deputies, Sheriff Trumbo, a 35-year law enforcement veteran, knew that he and his staff alone could not successfully combat the escalating crime problem. Such an effort would require the commitment of the entire community—the farmers, ranchers, and others who lived in the remote areas where crimes typically occurred. “I had always wanted a crime prevention program for Umatilla County because I believe we need to work directly with our citizens to solve the problems we have,” Sheriff Trumbo said. “The problem is, with any crime prevention program, you must have a coordinator who is willing to put in the time needed. That person has to have great people skills. Also, the public has to know that he or she is sincere in the desire to make things better.” Enter Sergeant Greg Hodgen.

In 2005, Sheriff Trumbo learned that Hodgen, an old friend, had recently

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(L to R) Sergeant Greg Hodgen, Crime Prevention Specialist and Rural Neighborhood Coordinator, with Umatilla County Sheriff Trumbo

retired from the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office (which serves the city of Portland) and had decided to return to his hometown of Pendleton, the Umatilla County seat. Trumbo called Hodgen and, over lunch, the two hammered out ideas for forming a crime prevention program. Hodgen agreed to coordinate what was to later be dubbed the Rural Neighborhood Watch Program (RNW), anticipating that it would require two or three afternoons of work a week. Two-and-a-half years after this initial meeting, the RNW has burgeoned into a growing network of 14 Watch groups with more than 500 active members. What Trumbo and Hodgen thought would be a part-time job now keeps both officers busy most days and evenings. Hodgen's wife, Doris, has also joined the team as a sworn deputy sheriff and is responsible for managing membership files and maintaining the RNW identification card program. "We are in the field together two or three nights a week training and

recruiting and we are at our desk at headquarters five days a week, for four to eight hours," Sergeant Hodgen noted. "It's a good thing that we are retired!"

Hodgen came to the Umatilla County Sheriff's Office with an impressive resume that included experience in city, state, and federal law enforcement; corrections, and security. Although prior to accepting Sheriff Trumbo's offer he had never been directly involved with Neighborhood Watch, he used proven models upon which to base the RNW Program. "While working for the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office, I got the chance to see how the Portland Police Bureau operates its Neighborhood Watch program," he said. Hodgen also gleaned information from the Internet and turned to the National Sheriffs' Association for guidance and training, making extensive use of the association's Tool kit.

At first, generating interest in the

Neighborhood Watch Program, proved challenging due to the diversity of the Umatilla County population and the sheer distances that separates neighbors from each other. Building a bridge to the community took time and lots of one-on-one effort, but word of mouth about the program's effectiveness eventually helped fuel the RNW's growth. "The biggest asset of the RNW Program is the decrease in crime," said Sheriff Trumbo. "Our active Neighborhood Watch groups are seeing a 50- to 60-percent reduction in criminal activity." Two keys to the RNW Program's continuing success are the organization's intensive screening and training programs. There is no minimum size requirement for groups interested in forming a Neighborhood Watch. However, all prospective members must submit to a background check. While certain felony convictions can be grounds for refusal of membership, Sheriff Trumbo and Sergeant Hodgen often will interview applicants with blemished police records to determine if past troubles have been resolved and if the individuals are sincere in their desire to participate in RNW Program. When a group's application is complete, important information such as members' geographical addresses, crossroads, and license numbers, are entered into a database for emergency use, and each group member is issued an identification number that starts with the first letter of his or her unit's name (e.g., "J" for the Juniper Unit). New members are tasked with learning the number and color of vehicles within their unit and other details that could prove useful in emergencies.

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Once new members complete their mandatory training courses, they are treated to an open house/graduation ceremony hosted by the Sheriff's Office. Hodgen and Trumbo have developed a comprehensive three-part training program for new members that culminate in an open house and informational tour of the Sheriff's Office, Dispatch Center, and correctional facilities. "I stress to volunteers during their very first meeting that if they look like victims, I guarantee that at some point in their lives they will be victimized," Trumbo said. "The criminals of today have had years to train, to talk to their fellow inmates in prison, and they've learned what a victim looks like." New member training is structured "outside to inside." First, members learn basic steps for protecting their homes' exteriors and personal property, such as installing deadbolt locks and illuminating the long driveways found on most rural farmhouses with motion sensor lighting. "Burglars can drive by a house and, in a matter of seconds, determine if it's someplace they want to stop," Sheriff Trumbo tells new volunteers. "We've had members say they saw a car slow down in front of their house, speed away quickly, and then rob a house down the road that hadn't taken these measures." The second training period teaches new members self-defense techniques and explains liability issues that apply to the use of deadly force. Participants learn about safe rooms and how to barricade themselves should a criminal break into their homes. They are taught to avoid confronting perpetrators—who they should always assume are armed and/or on drugs—whenever possible. For situations when confrontation is



Deputy Doris Hodgen and Sergeant Greg Hodgen

unavoidable, however, participants are taught various options for self-defense and threat mitigation. Hodgen encourages members to practice safety techniques regularly, as they would fire drills: "I call it 'muscle memory.' If you practice something often enough, your body will respond without you thinking about it," he explained. "If someone is kicking in your door at 2 a.m. and you are practiced, you will respond automatically." During the final session, new members are taught how to recognize signs of potential illegal activity, effectively patrol their neighborhoods, and gather evidence for submission to law enforcement. One block of training focusing on illegal substances teaches participants how to recognize drug scenes common to the area (e.g., marijuana grows and methamphetamine labs) and describes the various effects different drugs have on users. Sheriff's Office personnel train members to use equipment such as radar detectors

in order to track and record vehicle speed. During every aspect of training, member safety is a top priority, and trainers continually stress that the role of the RNW Program is to look out for and report illegal activity, not apprehend criminals. Nonetheless, Sheriff Trumbo does not underestimate the critical role Umatilla County's crime prevention volunteers' play: "It takes a lot of fortitude for RNW Program members to get out there, investigate, and gather information. It is very important to back up our members with our support." As part of the ongoing commitment to support its volunteers, the Sheriff's Office also provides specialized training to the RNW Program upon request. Law enforcement professionals with expertise in subjects such as child neglect, domestic violence, and sexual abuse are available to provide training tailored to individual group needs.

Running crime out of business several RNW Program units have had the

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Communications Sergeant John Shafer describes the workings of the Umatilla County 911 Dispatch Center to new members.

opportunity to hone their evidence-gathering skills, they learned during their initial training, thanks in part, to a new state law. RNW Program volunteers have monitored and documented suspicious happenings, they send letters to the district attorney, the mortgage company of the home in question, and the property owner notifying these parties of their intent to file suit. Through meticulous documentation, one Blue Mountains RNW unit recently was successful in closing a drug house that was disturbing the tranquil vacation community. After law enforcement officers raided the house, unit members teamed up to beautify the area. They then set to training a group of youth volunteers, who now clean and maintain the site throughout the year.

Another RNW unit in Umatilla County's tiny Meacham community, population 100, is celebrating a similar coup. Watch members suspected a neighborhood property of

illicit activity when strangers began showing up and leaving minutes later and returning at regular intervals. Members also observed property being taken into the house that didn't seem to belong. Over time, the unit gathered sufficient evidence for law enforcement to obtain a search warrant. During the subsequent raid on the property, sheriff's deputies arrested two suspects, seized four stolen guns and other property, and solved crimes related to a previous burglary.

The RNW evidence-gathering and letter-writing technique has been so successful that mortgage companies have inspected and repossessed certain properties for owner violation of the mortgage contract without the need for court intervention. RNW units are now attempting to get a new universal county property ordinance passed that would declare specified crime properties to be a nuisance and give the court power to temporarily seize them. As the RNW Program expands,

the need for communication and interaction between individual members, units, and the Sheriff's Office is increasing. In response to this need, the Sheriff's Office has established a new program whereby members may volunteer as Liaison Officers.

After completing training, Liaison Officers visit other RNW Program members, as well as nonmember ranchers and farmers, to share crime prevention expertise and raise awareness.

"Our Liaison Officers will be an extension of the Sheriff's Office, essentially establishing a presence in remote areas and obtaining first hand information on possible crime activity in the areas they visit while sharing a cup of coffee with the people they visit," Hodgen explained. Although recently launched, the RNW Liaison Officer Program already has a waiting list, and Sheriff Trumbo and Sergeant Hodgen have high hopes for the future of the Umatilla County Rural Neighborhood Watch Program. "We get a lot of requests from people who want to start RNW units. My goal is to have more units in all areas of the county," said Sheriff Trumbo. Reflecting on the RNW Program's ongoing success, Sergeant Hodgen added, "We've really knocked the criminal element off guard. They never know who's watching them."

"Stretching the Long Arm of the Law" courtesy of the National Sheriff's Association. ★