

GANGS

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Watsonville cop shares his expertise on gangs

BY PAULINE ZENNER
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When youth counselors, police officers, the courts or community leaders need advice on gang-related issues, they call an expert, Watsonville police Sgt. Eddie Rodriguez.

And when gangs strike out against the community or one another, Rodriguez calls a meeting to listen to and talk with them.

Rodriguez's understanding of

gangs comes not only from his eight years on the police force but also from his growing up in Watsonville.

"I've developed a knowledge over the years of who the gangs are and what they're all about," Rodriguez said. "I knew a lot of these guys through friends, and I went to high school with some of them. I haven't had any problems

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with them. I think they even respect the work I do."

The 31-year-old officer said he became recognized as the county's gang intelligence expert four years ago when Watsonville Municipal Judge Heather Morse, then an assistant district attorney, asked him to testify on a gang-related attempted murder trial.

Morse said Rodriguez's expertise was an invaluable resource that had been "virtually untapped." Rodriguez has since testified as a gang expert in other criminal cases in Santa Cruz, Santa Clara and Monterey counties.

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— Sgt. Eddie Rodriguez

have otherwise been an unsolvable murder into an understandable homicide for the jury," Morse said. "He understands gangs and can explain to people their subculture and the motives and biases of the players."

While his gang expertise is often needed in court, Morse said, Rodriguez's work in gang intervention and deterrence is price-

less.

"He's good at educating people in the system who work with gang problems on how to solve them," Morse said. "I've also been to several seminars where he has educated people who aren't aware of the dangers of gang violence."

Rodriguez's interest in gang intervention began shortly after he joined the police force. He came to realize that nearly two-thirds of his cases were gang-related. Those crimes often are the most severe type, such as homicides, drive-by shootings and assaults. Officials say the city has about 400 gang members, belonging to four groups.

After two years as a patrolman, Rodriguez became a detective and used his street knowl-

edge to develop his gang expertise.

But the turning point came in 1989 when the Street Terrorism Enforcement Act authorized police departments to trace gang activity through information files.

The Watsonville Police Department, Rodriguez said, started the first computer data base listing gang-related activity.

The system, now widely used by police departments, contains criteria such as activities, nicknames, friends and color of clothing that allow the police to classify an individual as a gang member for prosecution and other purposes, he said.

"Before the act was established, it was very difficult to get gang information entered in as testimony because it was consid-

ered prejudicial," Rodriguez said. "The system has helped us in many ways."

Rodriguez received an award early this year from the Santa Cruz County Criminal Justice System for his achievements.

The award, he said, was for being the first to develop the expertise to use the gang information in testimony, and for his work with the Gang Intervention Team, which he helped start before being promoted to sergeant two years ago.

Officer Henry Robles took over Rodriguez's position with that team when Rodriguez was promoted to sergeant.

The Gang Intervention Team was formed when Rodriguez got together with other people in the community who were interested

in discouraging young people from joining gangs. Others involved included representatives of the Watsonville Recreation Department, the Pajaro Valley Student Assistant Program, Youth Services and the Fenix drug and alcohol program.

"We had this idea of targeting gang want-to-bes," Rodriguez said. "We felt we could turn these kids around by providing the social and cultural needs that the gangs were providing."

"Joining a gang is a mistake these kids are making in their adolescent years. The program tries to prevent them from making that mistake by providing conflict resolution, peer counseling, drug and alcohol programs, gang education, recreation and job alternatives."