

Seascape Vandalism a Community-Wide Problem

by Joel Moreno

Two Aptos teenagers arrested on felony vandalism charges at the Seascape shopping center fit a growing pattern of youthful offenders, the supervisor of the sheriff's special enforcement team said.

Sergeant Len Lofano of the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office said he observed the juveniles etching the glass panes of storefronts at the Seascape Village Shopping Center on the night of December 10.

Lofano said he and his partner recognized both youths from previous investigations of vandalism reports. The 15-year-old was awaiting a court appearance for an arrest in October on almost two

tagging. The sergeant said both juveniles fit a pattern of compulsive graffiti tagging, drug use and inadequate parental supervision after hours.

Altogether, 42 windows from 15 businesses at the Seascape shopping center were etched by the pair with rocks. They scratched their tag names—TWEAKER and MORG—as well as what appeared to be scribbles into the glass panes.

"It was mostly window etching. There was some magic marker stuff done. There were some mirrors that were defaced," said Chuck Holcomb, who manages the shopping center.

Holcomb estimates the damage is over \$6,000. Among the businesses affected were Palapas Restaurant, Village Cycle Sports, Holcomb Real Estate, Maggies Clothing and Seascape Flowers and Antiques.

"We do our best to keep our shopping center looking neat and clean and tidy and presentable to the general public every way we can," Holcomb said.

He added his insurance company will determine whether to pursue monetary damages from the suspects or their guardians.

The cost of vandalism affects more than just the business owner, as they are forced to respond with increased security and other counter measures to protect their workplace. The costs are eventually born by the consumer.

Steven Marburg, owner of Village Cycle Sports, said the shopping center has been the target of taggers and vandals in the past. He said it is very difficult to prevent vandalism without an armed guard available 24-hours a day.

"We've had security guards on site for some time," Holcomb said. "We've also had a very close association with the sheriff's office."

Lofano claimed that the

sheriff's special enforcement team has made just about every arrest in felony vandalism cases in the county this year. Lofano, who testifies as a gang expert periodically in court,

said his special enforcement team is specifically trained to handle gang enforcement and graffiti problems. He and the two

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Profile of a Tagger

by Joel Moreno

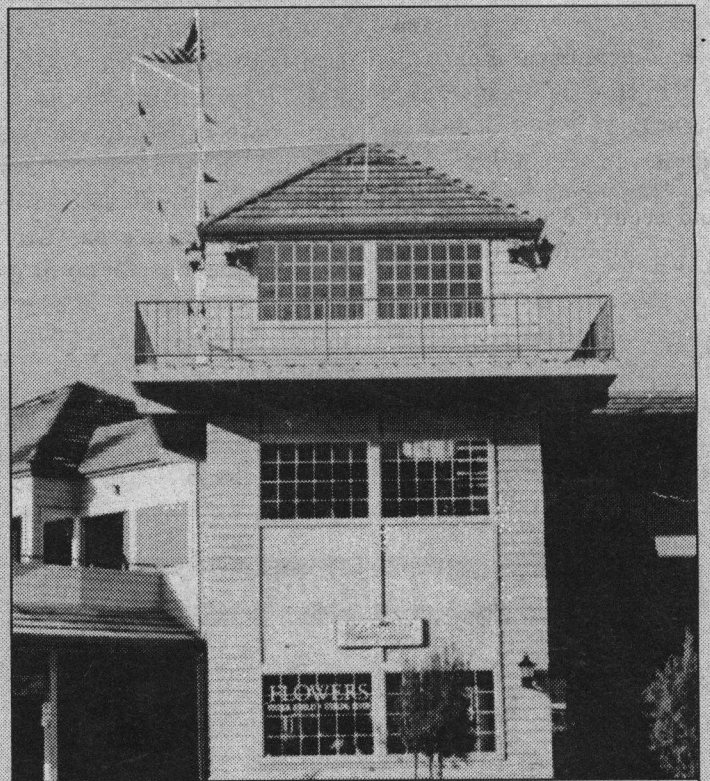
Sheriff's officers working on cases of graffiti and vandalism say there are certain habits common to most taggers which helps law enforcement in identifying and arresting them.

Sergeant Len Lofano, special enforcement team supervisor for the sheriff's office, described three main types of tagging that occurs in the county: gang graffiti, tagging graffiti and peacers.

Gang graffiti is often a territorial marker or a way to issue challenges to rival gangs. Peacers are the muralists, and taggers are the "catch me if you can" types who will paint or etch their moniker on everything until they are caught. For taggers, the more walls they deface with their tag, the more famous they see themselves to be, the sergeant said.

In the case of taggers, they tend to use the same monicker design, Lofano said. Therefore, catching them committing an act of graffiti at one site might connect them to another site where the same logo appears. Graffiti vandals tend to want their own identifying marks as a "calling card" to where they've been, the sergeant said, which helps police link them to other graffiti reports in various areas.

Taggers are very competitive with each other, and what one group does one week will be outdone by another group the



Seascape Village

following week, creating a kind of domino effect. These spray paint battles can end up costing the county and businesses tens of thousands of dollars.

Although two youths recently arrested at Seascape shopping center for vandalism were not believed to be under the influence of drugs at the time of their arrest, Lofano said the 15-year-old was using methamphetamine when he was arrested in October for a similar vandalism incident.

Methamphetamine is the

drug of choice among taggers, he said. It's inexpensive, it's a longer high than other drugs, and it keeps the user awake all night long.

"They live through the night. They're used to existing in the darkness," Lofano said.

Graffiti vandals are most active on weekends from midnight to about 5:00 a.m. Lofano said.

They will go to great lengths to travel the night and leave their mark everywhere they can, he added. □



dozen incidences of vandalism. The officers also suspected the 17-year-old's involvement in graffiti vandalism in other parts of Aptos. Lofano described the alleged vandals as "addicted" to graffiti tagging.

"It's a whole subculture. It's a real addictive lifestyle," Lofano said of

Graffiti

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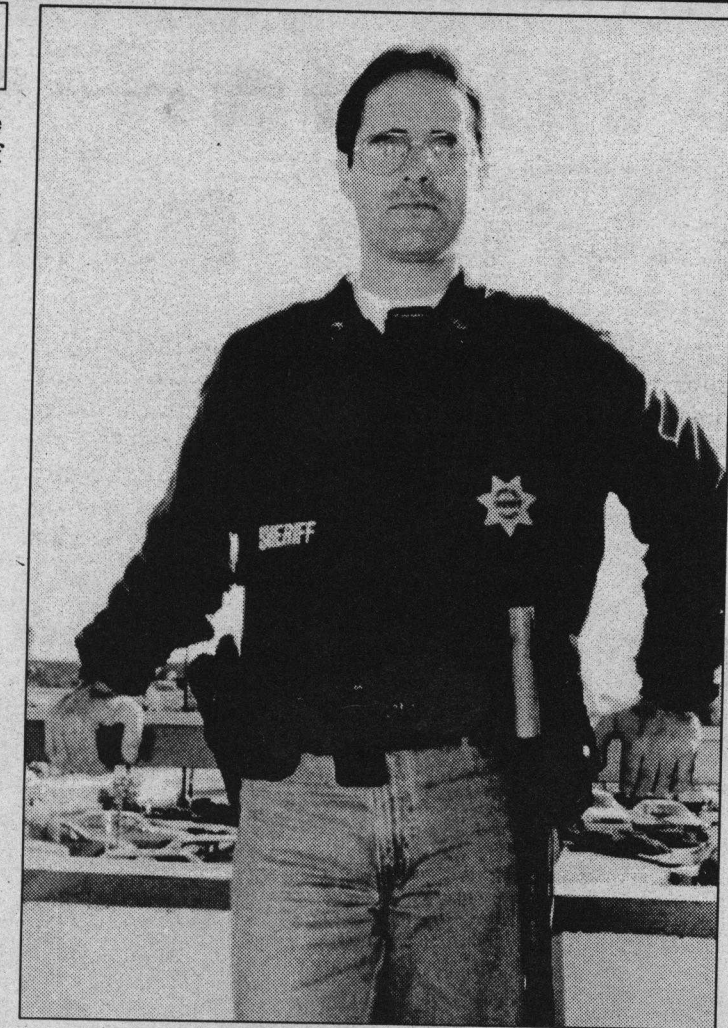
other team members have had hundreds of hours of classroom instruction in addition to the lessons learned on the beat, he said.

Arrest Leads to Multiple Criminal Charges

In the instance of a felony vandalism charge, Lofano said a teenage suspect can expect to be physically arrested, handcuffed and brought to juvenile hall. If it is his first felony offense, deputies will bring him to the county jail for processing, which includes being fingerprinted, photographed and entered into the computer system. If it is the weekend and he is going to be housed at juvenile hall, authorities must be sure to separate the suspect from other inmates who might harm him.

Both of the arrested teenagers were linked to spray paint vandalism at the Seascape Resort that had occurred earlier in the week. According to principal Ron Severson, they will also be linked to a graffiti case at Aptos High School, where they both attend.

The younger of the two juveniles is awaiting a



Santa Cruz County Sergeant Len Lofano

court appearance on vandalism charges stemming from an incident on October 28. He was connected to 21 acts of vandalism throughout Seascape and Rio del Mar, when he allegedly scribed CDS

(Criminal Deviance Society) and PHER (fear). The police report noted that the younger juvenile was reported as a runaway by his father.

"The parents can be held responsible for the monetary damage," sergeant Joe Hemingway of the sheriff's office said.

Hemingway said what concerns him most in this case is that a 15-year-old caught for felony vandalism in October would be caught committing a similar crime a month and a half later.

"It's an attitude of defiance and a disrespect for other people's property," Hemingway said. "I mean, you can't tell me all those businesses they tagged offended them personally."

No action against the 15-year-old has been taken by the courts on that previous vandalism arrest, which Tracy said is not uncommon.

"Legally, we need to find some better way to

deal with juveniles who are involved in these very costly crimes," Tracy said. Insufficient Resources

Once a deputy makes an arrest and files the report, juvenile vandalism cases move on to other law enforcement authorities. Officers say that while they can oftentimes catch the juvenile, the system as a whole can't make these teenage graffiti vandals feel accountable for their actions.

Part of the problem is the juvenile hall facility, a remnant of the 1970s that can no longer accommodate the numbers of juvenile criminals being processed.

"Our juvenile hall right now is antiquated," Lofano said.

Juvenile hall doesn't have any room to house people going into the facility for non-violent crimes because, surprisingly enough, the majority of the juveniles in the facility are incarcerated for murder or attempted murder.

"Before we go out and target a group of juvenile criminals, I will call [juvenile hall] and ask how much bed space they have because I am restricted in

how many people I can bring up there, unless it's a homicide or emergency," Lofano said.

If Lofano could have one tool to work with to combat teenage vandalism, it would be setting a limitation on how late they could be out unsupervised at night.

"The biggest thing this community can do is push for a curfew for people under the age of 18. If they can't leave, if they can't get out of the house except for a legitimate purpose...they can't vandalize," Lofano said.

Using what they have currently, the sheriff's office has taken a serious and aggressive approach to the problem of graffiti and vandalism. Sheriff's officers have made over 15 arrests this year of individuals who combined for almost \$150,000 in damages during their crime spree.

Lofano said his team can identify the culprit for about 50 percent of the total felony vandalism cases reported to the department.

"That doesn't mean that we can go out and arrest them, but we know who is doing it," Lofano said. □