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Hermosa Beach's Watch-ful eye

CRIME: It's showtime Tuesday for city's thriving neighborhood safety group.

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Kelly Kovac-Reedy never expected to become Hermosa Beach's No. 1 civilian crime fighter.

But in recent years, the lifelong South Bay resident has emerged as one of the city's most notable for her work reviving its Neighborhood Watch program after years of dormancy.

And with Kovac-Reedy at its helm, the group will show off its stuff with an extensive, carefully choreographed program Tuesday for National Night Out, an annual event challenging communities nationwide to unite against crime and violence.

While many communities long ago disbanded organized participation in the 25-year-old event, Hermosa has planned an elaborate night featuring vehicle and weapons demonstrations, meet-and-greets with police, fire and city officials, as well as an old-fashioned dessert contest.

On a larger scale, National Night Out's objective is to get communities to partner with law enforcement to help battle crime. But in a more tranquil community like Hermosa Beach, the goal is literally to get residents out of their homes, meeting neighbors and forming a network within the small town.

"I personally get a lot from those nights," Kovac-Reedy said. "I really love that community feeling. I see that a lot of those communities don't have it. They just don't have it, and I really feel fortunate."

Said Hermosa Beach Police Chief Greg Savelli: "We are fortunately not a crime-ridden city, so we use it as an opportunity to show residents our police resources."

Kovac-Reedy and two other mothers in town were shocked that Hermosa's Neighborhood Watch had fizzled years earlier.

So they worked to re-establish the program and, just more than two years later, about half of the city's 400 or so blocks are involved in the group, which receives modest city funding, Kovac-Reedy said.

Initially, Kovac-Reedy expected almost full participation in Neighborhood Watch - who wouldn't want to stop crime or be prepared for disaster, she wondered - but she has since learned to pace herself.

Even while still growing, the group has emerged as a bit of a force in town, launching an impressive e-mail network that alerts subscribers to crimes or other emergencies in town, and giving residents a say in their community.

And city officials are listening. "The community has a voice through Neighborhood Watch," Savelli said. "They basically provide a forum in which neighborhoods can talk to city staff - and that's just an adjunct because the real benefit of the program is making community members aware of how to protect their property."

Sometimes toiling 30 hours a week on the program, Kovac-Reedy's efforts have made her a bit of a power player in town - much to her surprise.

She now sits on the city's emergency preparedness commission and last fall received the Woman of the Year Award from the Hermosa Beach Chamber of Commerce.

And Hermosa's first-time National Night Out participation earned its Neighborhood Watch an award for the quality of its campaign, level of resident participation, police and fire involvement, and the uniqueness of its program.

But this week, Kovac-Reedy has her focus elsewhere.

"I don't care about the winning part now," she said. "I got that out my system. This time, it's about having fun."

And already, Kovac-Reedy has her sights set on next year's National Night Out.

She's hoping to add an educational element, teaching residents how to properly and safely use power tools - and, true to the event's purpose, involve as many people in the community as possible.

"We'll be doing that to make everyone feel included," Kovac-Reedy said.

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