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Extra eyes on crime in community

**By Kate Trotter
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Once a month on a Friday or Saturday night, Rita and Tim Pollock go out. Neighbours may conclude that the retired couple bowls a few frames or catches a movie but, in fact, they head to an undisclosed location, load their vehicle with a laptop computer, a two-way radio and a metal file holder. Then they hit the road until 2 a.m.

The Pollocks are as undercover as you can get, one of a small fleet of citizen volunteers who purposefully cruise city streets looking for stolen cars and trouble in the making.

"We don't provide enough money for police anymore," said Rita Pollock. "It's important for people to be the eyes and ears."

Added Tim: "I believe we have to take back the streets and keep them safe. The community has to pay for police or get out there and help."

Citizens' Crime Watch Patrol is comprised of 62 volunteers age 19 and older who commit to one six-hour shift a month and four meetings a year. They provide the patience, persistence and proximity that Coquitlam RCMP can no longer muster. On Friday and Saturday nights, teams patrol zones, running licence plate numbers through pocket computers, watching for suspicious behaviour and reporting potential trouble to a base radio operator who relays it to police.

Who, what and why

Good Friday night is quiet; the rare groups of people on Coquitlam streets are disappointed hockey fans. Schools grounds are empty and traffic light.

As large parking lots empty, abandoned cars stick out. Car thieves often dump vehicles in a crowd, said Colleen Staresina. "Dodge Caravans, older vehicles - cars without immobilizers. Hondas." Last year, 10,517 plates were checked and 33 belonged to stolen vehicles; one suspect was apprehended because a Crime Watch squad waited nearby until the driver returned to the vehicle and called police for the arrest. "We do the stuff [RCMP] don't have time to do," said Staresina.

"It's kind of instinctive," she said. "You get a feel for it."

She's a five-year crime watch member and the special events coordinator, organizing volunteers for traffic "re-direction" and other duties at 14 public events last year. "I just have a passion for crime prevention and it feels good to make a difference," she said.

"It's also saving money by preventing crime and vandalism.

"I always wanted to be a lawyer or a police officer but having a family didn't lend itself to that," she said.

Her children raised, she now does what she likes.

Tom Stone, vice-chair of the patrol, works for Cartunes Sound and Cellular, which supports the program with electronic gear. "I was living in PoCo when Breann Voth was killed and I figured I should get involved," Stone said.

"The biggest kick is helping your community out. It's also a great corps of people.

"Some nights it's worse than watching paint dry," he said. "Other nights, you'll be



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Citizens' Crime Watch Patrol volunteer Colleen Staresina is one of a dedicated group of Tri-City residents who work to help Coquitlam RCMP by putting more eyes on the street.

recovering stolen cars and stopping vandalism."

The program is supervised by Coquitlam RCMP and volunteers are trained and follow protocols: They do not leave their vehicles, they record information in evidentiary form, they use the language of policing.

Race night

Tricked-up cars are mustering at the Toys 'R Us parking lot but it's innocent-looking. Drivers and passengers mill about socially. An hour or so later, Staresina books a 10-61 at Tango Hotel (drives to the Tim Horton's on United Boulevard for a 15-minute coffee break). Some of the cars from the Toys 'R Us lot are heading in the same direction but continue south to the weekend wasteland of the industrial zone. Other clues emerge, police are called and a rubber-laying party is thwarted.

Christine Stanley is chairperson of Citizens Crime Watch Patrol and this night operates the base radio. Her fluid and sparkling repartee over the airwaves hints of something and she cops to a spell as a radio show host. Today, she manages commercial properties and, in seeking out property crime prevention, learned about the citizen patrol.

"You see the need out there, you see people who are frightened," she said. "The community should be aware that together every little voice becomes a big loud noise."

You can help

Citizens Crime Watch would like to add 16 volunteers to its roster. For information, call the crime prevention unit of Coquitlam RCMP at 604-945-1586.