

Phoenix Police Department  
Herman Goldstein Award Submission

***Project Kindle***

Among the rubble of an area contaminated with drug dealers, violent criminals, businesses, empty lots, and several city blocks of service providers for the homeless is a little, red house. An elderly gentleman with severe health problems resided there. The criminal element within the homeless population found this place an easy target and took advantage of the resident, who was too scared to call police for assistance. At this residence were local known prostitutes, crack addicts, illegal boot-leggers who sat on the porch waiting for customers, and an array of mysterious people milling about the yard. The exterior was completely run down, as was the interior. Police calls for service were high for rampant complaints of drug activity, dealing as well as smoking, and using crack cocaine. The homeless were forced to walk by the residence to get to their service providers for food, bus stops, health care, and the homeless shelter.

For more than 10 years, this house has just been there. Nothing has ever been done to try to solve the issues plaguing the residence. Officers working the area did not know the owner or who was supposed to reside there. It was almost as if the problems were allowed, or it was Kings X. Officers Robert Knapp and Travis Myers decided it was time for change. It was time to take ownership of the problems.

Officers began by talking to business owners in the area, hand searching through calls for service generated from the businesses, homeless people passing by, and officers on the squad. Each person contacted had the same answer: the house was not only irritating, but illegal activity had been going on there for many years. After conducting the research, officers attempted to talk with the resident. Soon City of Phoenix, Neighborhood Services Department stepped in, found numerous zoning violations, and declared the house uninhabitable. Thousands of dollars in fines were assessed to the owner, who resided out of state.

After contacting the owner, it was found she was unaware of what was going on inside the house. She could not afford the fines, and did not want the house. Officers volunteered to fix up the place and to evict the unwanted guests. The owner appreciated the officers' initiative; however, she wanted to find a way to destroy the house and relocate the tenant, who happened to be her father. Officers Knapp and Myers found the resources available by using the Phoenix Fire Department Training Academy and businesses in the area to donate their time. The house was ultimately burned to the ground.

News media took an interest in the story; the officers were on every morning talk show in the valley on live television. The owner flew in from California to witness the event. Recruits in the academy gained valuable training, which came just after the loss of a local firefighter who died while fighting a very large fire.

Businesses involved gained recognition for their help in cleaning up the demolished home.

With initiative, teamwork, and partnering with the community, these officers went beyond the scope of ordinary policing and began to truly problem solve, with magnificent results.

## **SCANNING**

During October 2000, officers from the South Mountain Precinct's walking beat squad began to notice various problems with a specific residence located within their operational area. This home appeared to be occupied by several different people, often seen in the front yard. A chain link fence topped with barbed wire and secured with a padlock surrounded the structure. Individuals inside the yard were often reluctant to speak with police, making consensual contacts difficult. The structure was dilapidated with broken windows, patchwork fencing, missing roof shingles, and trash strewn about the yard.

Officers began to receive numerous complaints of illegal narcotics activity at the residence from business owners and residents in the area. Complainants advised of drug transactions occurring in the front yard. Officers also observed evidence of illegal vending (subjects selling alcohol, snacks, candy, and *cigarettes*) through *the fence, to the large* homeless population *in the area*. On a daily basis, different vehicles parked illegally on the roadway in front of the residence: Numerous people would congregate between the vehicles and the fence line, blocking the sidewalk. This forced pedestrians to walk in the roadway to pass the home causing a danger to motorists and pedestrians alike. This activity was also indicative of street-level narcotics dealing and illegal street vending.

This residence was located approximately 400 yards from the Central Arizona Shelter Services (CASS) building, which is the states largest homeless shelter. The proximity of the house in relation to CASS provided illegal vendors and drug dealers with a constant supply of customers and a steady supply of calls for service to the police. As the problem continued to increase, despite constant efforts of police to warn individual vendors, issue traffic citations, and conduct covert surveillance operations, it became apparent that a new strategy would need to be implemented.

Two weeks after detailing the problem, Officers Robert Knapp and Travis Myers advised their immediate supervisor, Sergeant Jennifer LaRoque, that they had plans to contact the occupants of the property to discuss the ongoing situation. These officers, along with additional officers from the walking beat unit, contacted the residents of the property on October 15<sup>th</sup> 2001. This contact revealed a vast amount of problems on a much larger scale than originally expected.

- The only legal resident on the property was an elderly male in his late sixties with multiple health problems.
- The owner of the property lived in California and was the daughter of the legal resident.

- The other occupants of the residence were not welcome on the property but had taken advantage of the legal resident, exploiting his inability to resist their demands and threatening him.
- Trash and debris were strewn throughout the entire property.
- People were living in old camper shells at the rear of the property, powering the camper with extension cords strewn through the sewage-flooded yard from the house.

The exterior of the house was dilapidated broken windows, missing roof shingles, rotting wood, vehicles stored on unpaved lot, and doors cracked and held together with tape.

- The interior of the structure could not provide potable water, had virtually no effective plumbing, had a collapsing ceiling, and was covered with un-eaten food and infested with insects

## ANALYSIS

The residence (a red brick house) located at 1007 West Madison Street was located in the middle of a gauntlet that the homeless walk from daylight to nightfall to obtain services they need. In the midst of the businesses, stood this

red brick house. This residence served as a flop house for drug dealers, prostitutes, illegal liquor distributor; other criminal activity flourished inside and outside. Officers used the following resources to confront the issues surrounding the red brick house:

- *Officers' observations*
- *Neighborhood complaints*
- *Calls for service*

The problems that surrounded the residence in the past were essentially ignored by officers who previously worked the area. Talking with officers who worked the area before the South Mountain Precinct took over, it was apparent that they were unaware of who actually lived there and who the owner was.

After researching the residence, the owner was found to reside in California. One occupant was allowed to be inside the residence, an elderly gentleman with health problems, and the father of the owner. This gentleman would allow unwanted guests to stay at his residence. These guests would sit on the front porch and sell narcotics and liquor during the day and night. Upon interview with the resident, he informed us that he did not want anyone staying with him; however, it appeared the people selling drugs from his residence used intimidation tactics to stay there to conduct their illegal activities.

The homeless became victims of the narcotics sales while unable to avoid the residence as they walked by to one or more locations of service. Businesses

next door complained that their customers were being harrassed by the dealers at the house trying to sell to them.

In the past, officers would respond to calls for service but could not see any illegal activity occurring. The problems continued without answers for change.

Officers advised business owners on each side to contact the police when they observed illegal activity or any other problems and to ask for contact by the officers responding. Business owners could not think of a solution to fix the problem.

## **RESPONSE**

In dealing with this unique situation, Officers Myers and Knapp conducted more than 60 hours of meetings with the local contact for the residence. Numerous hours of discussion yielded the following response options:

- Repair the structure by bringing it into compliance with all municipal building codes.
  
- + Demolishing the structure using resources provided by local business owners in conjunction with the National Guard.



- Sell the property, with the purchaser agreeing to either demolish the structure or bring it up to code.
- Sell the property to local homeowner's association for use as neighborhood offices.
- Use the structure as a training tool by the Phoenix Fire Department to conduct a controlled burn exercise.

The local contact expressed to us through conversations she had with the owner in California that they wished to retain the property. However, due to the state of disrepair of the structure and the cost associated with addressing the numerous zoning violations, fixing the structure was not an option. The owner of the property was very interested in destroying the structure at no cost to her, while maintaining ownership of the land. After considering all this information, we came to a mutual decision that the best plan of attack was to see if the City of Phoenix could implement a controlled burn in conjunction with the Fire Department's training division.

The Phoenix Police Department considered numerous criteria before implementing this project. Considerations included:

- The impact a controlled burn would have on residents and business owners in the neighborhood.
- The proximity of other structures around the target house.
- The political and environmental ramifications of conducting a large scale structure fire in the center of downtown Phoenix.
- The cost to the City for demolition of the structure.
- Creating a legal document authorizing the City to enter into and to demolish the structure.
- Whether the operation would significantly improve the quality of life for citizens in the community.

Once initiated, this project's objective quickly became multifaceted. The primary goal was to eliminate this location as a transient gathering point for the purpose of illegal narcotic sales and illegal vending. Once the resident was relocated and trespassers were evicted, drug and vending problems ceased; however, the focus was shifted to assisting the owner of the property in dealing with the rundown structure. A plan was organized to use a current recruit training class from the Phoenix Fire Department Training Academy that would enable us to

burn the structure at no cost to the owner. This plan also allowed fire recruits to gain valuable, real-life training in a controlled environment.

A plethora of City resources were used to implement this operational plan:

- Phoenix Police Department (41Z Squad)
- Phoenix Fire Department Training Academy
- Phoenix City Attorney's Office
- Phoenix Neighborhood Services Department
- Environmental Protection Agency
- Phoenix Waste Management Division
- Community business owners
- Maricopa County Department of Air Quality
- Maricopa County Superior Court

Before implementing our response plan, the resident of the property was relocated to a more livable residence. Trespassers who had strong-armed their way into living on the property were evicted within five days under a health and safety regulation. The property was posted with no trespassing signs and boarded in accordance with City zoning regulations. The City of Phoenix Attorney's Office then authored an indemnification/hold-harmless contract between the City of Phoenix and the property owner. Simultaneously, as this paperwork was being faxed to California to be signed by the owner, meetings

were conducted with the Fire Departments training division to develop a logistical plan for the controlled burn.

The Neighborhood Services Department then placed us in contact with the Waste Management Department, which supplied heavy equipment for clean-up and debris removal after the burn. A date was set for the burn; business owners, residents, and community homeless services in the area were notified as were local television and print and radio media. The property owner and the Police Chief signed off on the indemnity contract. Tests conducted by the Fire Department, Department of Air Quality and the Environmental Protection Agency for asbestos and other hazards were negative, and after two date cancellations by the Fire Department, the house was set ablaze on March 21, 2001.

Throughout this entire process, we received overwhelming support from the community and the City departments involved in making this project a success. However, the Department of Air Quality (DAQ) was very concerned about the smoke that would be released into the air and felt the need to retest the structure for contaminants even after the expensive tests had been conducted by the Fire Department. DAQ eventually arrived at the same conclusion as the Fire Department that there were no hazardous materials in the structure. The burn date was reinstated.

As we waited for the second burn date to arrive, an assistant chief of the Fire Department, with no information regarding our project, received a phone call from an anonymous source claiming that we did not have all our paperwork in order. Literally 11 hours before our burn time, this assistant fire chief pulled his resources and left us scrambling to call everyone. The political battle began to heat up, with the assistant fire chief stating that smoke from the fire would be seen by the seated City Counsel and that it would cause untimely political ramifications.

Community business owners in the area were upset with the now second cancellation of the burn and, when informed of the reasoning behind it, they began to make phone calls to City officials. After receiving a phone call from the mayor of the City of Phoenix, the assistant fire chief decided that burning the house was in the best interests of the community; however, the assistant chief now wanted to just burn the structure and not utilize the highly detailed plan developed during the months of strategic planning. Due to serious safety issues of not using a well-thought-out plan Lieutenant Tallman, Sergeant LaRoque, and Officer Myers spent an entire 10 hour shift calling all their contacts in an attempt to plead the case. Officer Knapp spent eight hours on his day off on his personal cellular phone working this political phenomenon from his end. The end of this day saw us victorious as the Fire Department came back on board with their full support, and we rescheduled for the third and final burn date.

## **ASSESSMENT**

On March 21, 2001, the dilapidated residential structure at 1007 West Madison street was methodically set on fire 12 separate times in a controlled burn training exercise monitored by the Fire Department. During the course of this approximately 10-hour training exercise, recruits gained valuable lifesaving training, while the property owner watched thousands of dollars in zoning violations go up in smoke. Police officers who patrol this area watched as a notorious location for multiple problems and numerous calls for service crumbled and the community watched as a thorn in their side was removed. At 1406 hours, the only thing left of the structure was a smoldering pile of rubble.

In the week that followed, heavy equipment hauled away the debris and front loaders poured dirt over the property lot and smoothed it out. This project took nearly six months of continuous work by Officers Knapp and Myers and Sergeant LaRoque; however, the end result was well worth the time invested. All parties involved benefited from the success of this intense project from the police and firefighters to the owner, the resident, and the community. The whole operation was win-win.

The effectiveness of our project overall is obviously apparent in its finality alone; however, the joy to a family in need and the relief felt by a community that felt helpless is immeasurable. The shelter area of South Phoenix will doubtlessly

continue to demand numerous calls for service from the police. Over time, however, and with continued vigilance, we will seek creative problem-solving techniques and together with the community we will enjoy an environment less violent and crime ridden.

**AGENCY and OFFICER INFORMATION:**

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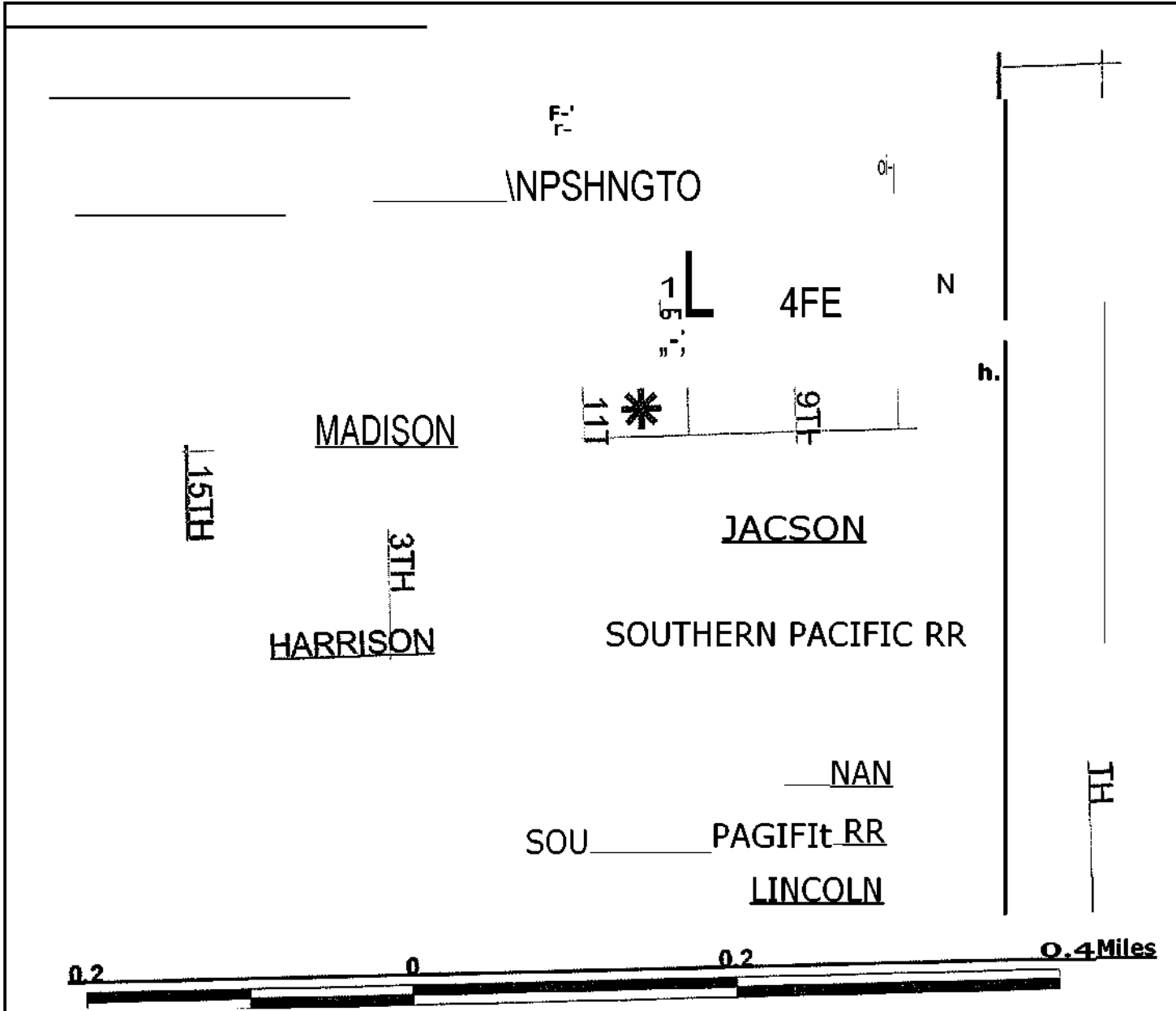
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# 1007 West Madison Street 3127100 - 3127101



- 27 Felony Arrests
- 15 Field Interviews
- 12 Narcotic Reports
- 7 Agg Felonies
- 52 Liquor Violations