

## **Koban Policing Restores Paradise**

*by Lara Jakes*

Five years ago, the Paradise at Parkside apartment complex in Northeast didn't even come close to living up to its name.

The community housed one of the District's largest outdoor drug markets. Afraid to leave their homes, residents remained behind locked doors and boarded windows. Children were scarcely seen and never heard.

"At 5 a.m. the dirt patches were full of people roaming, crackheads looking for drugs," says Paul Tramontano, who manages the complex.

"We didn't have community organization," he says. "People used to park their cars and run to their door. I never saw children out here."

But when Nation of Islam security cracked down on crime there in 1990, the neighborhood slowly began seeing and seeking a better way of life.

And with the initiation of a police koban on Halloween, residents are beginning to come out from behind their doors to take an active role in keeping the area safe for children.

It's not exactly paradise, but it's getting there.

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The koban, modeled after a Japanese community policing program, is staffed by three police officers and several social workers. Together, they work to solve drug and domestic problems in the complex while tutoring students and taking neighborhood kids on outings such as Georgetown University basketball games.

"Whatever the problems are, we are pro-active," says Edward Leftwich, the koban's director. "Other [community policing programs] just respond, rather than being pro-active to stop crime before it happens.

"But if you intervene at this point, at this time of a kid's life, maybe he doesn't become a statistic," Mr. Leftwich says.

Most Japanese communities have their own koban, a small kiosk manned by a police officer, where people can go to get help or directions. These neighborhoods tend to revolve around their koban, where the officer often teaches karate to youngsters and spreads the word about community events.

"In Japan, new officers walk door to door to introduce themselves to the community," says Lynn Curtis, president of the Eisenhower Foundation, one of the groups supporting the koban program. "They say, 'I'm the new officer. This is my wife. Please come over for tea this afternoon."

"When we saw that, we realized that American communities didn't trust police as much as Japanese communities did," he says. "The whole purpose is to make the police officers a living part of the community."

Since 1988, when the Washington-based Eisenhower Foundation began working with police to set up kobans in this country, five have been established in Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, San Juan, Puerto Rico, and, most recently, Washington.

While it's still early for the Parkside koban, in neighborhoods in the other cities where kobans were set up, crime rates dropped at least 20 percent over a three-year period, Mr. Curtis says.

"In every case the idea is to create an American variation on Japanese themes," he says. "Paradise at Parkside is very sensitive to that development.

"Facts speak for themselves. We didn't do this as a quick fix. The dramatic decline in crime is unique in this business because it's not easy to reduce crime in tough, inner-city neighborhoods," he says. "So we're on to something here."

Bolstered by a \$1 million grant from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, the foundation hopes to open nine new kobans this year: two in Columbia, S.C., and one each in Chicago; San Juan; Los Angeles; Baltimore; Little Rock, Ark.; Memphis, Tenn.; and Newark, N.J.

"It seems to be a perfect marriage," Mr. Curtis says. "They have a presence of police right in the neighborhood."

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It's more than just security, however. The staff at the Parkside koban say they have become role models, surrogate parents and even friends with the children and residents in the complex.

"Since I've been here, I've seen lots of children," says Officer Mona Lynch, one of the three resident officers at the koban.

"The basic problem with children is that they don't see the other side of policing. The only thing they see of police is when [officers] are swinging a stick or coming to lock them away," she says. "The thing is to let children know to not be afraid of us. We try to let them know they have a friend."

Another koban officer, William Jackson, grew up in Parkside and came back after earning his badge to keep an eye on his old stomping grounds. Today, he tutors kids, organizes basketball games and chaperones trips to Baltimore as a way of giving something to the community that was not there before.

"Lots of children here want to do well, but their parents don't have the skills," Officer Jackson says. "That's had an impact. Growing up here, I didn't have anyone to tutor me."

Indeed, Wilbert Hines, 13, could hardly be stopped as he hurried to a tutoring session on his bike recently, with a folder stuffed with science and English homework under his arm.

"The tutors help us out with our homework," he says. "I like math best. It's fun. And the problems they give you are hard, and that's fun, too."

It wasn't so long ago that Wilbert, who has always lived in Parkside, would not dare ride his bike around the courtyard. When he was 8, he says, the area was controlled by thugs "going around beating up people."

"There was a lot of drugs then, but it's quiet now. I ain't never scared anymore. I know mostly everybody 'round here. Some are friendly."

That's in part due to the policing presence in the neighborhood.

"They look at us as they grow up and think of us as role models," says Officer Richard Saunders, the third koban staffer. "We want to keep that concept as the next generation comes to replace us."

"I remember saying to myself, 'I could never live here or raise a family here,' " says Officer Saunders. "You never saw people just hanging out. Now I do live here. It seems like a happier place to be."

Besides organizing activities, like summer camps and Sega video game tournaments, the officers and the counselors at the koban help both the

children and their parents write resumes. The koban sponsors computer training seminars and helps people of all ages apply for jobs.

"We want these kids to be able to compete in today's society and come out as taxpayers," says Alonzo Patterson, an advocate coordinator who promotes self-esteem programs and helps with job training. "We're people who have come out of here and done something productive with our lives."

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At Parkside, kids know better than to utter a four-letter word on the basketball court. The neighborhood may be the only one in the city where cursing is a crime.

"We holler at them out the window," says Officer Lynch. "They know us very well."

That community spirit is generated from the koban's small office but is the result of a partnership between several groups - the local Boys and Girls Club, the apartment management and residents who welcome the changes.

"It takes a whole community to raise a child," Mr. Leftwich says. "Something is happening out here - and it's pretty special."