



Phyllis Christopher

Members of the Neighborhood Law Corps, the Unity Council Inc. and the Neighborhood Crime Prevention Council pack a powerful punch in the public interest. These activist members are, left to right, Portia Glassman

(NLC), Jenny Kassan (Unity Council), Laura Blair (NLC), James Anthony (NLC), Alexander Nguyen (NLC), Melissa Brown (NLC) and Mark Daly (NCPC). Thanks to the group effort, Tampico has become a healthier business.

Defenders of the 'Hood

Lawyer Activists Build Public Trust

BY KATHLEEN MALLOY

Like police walking the beat, the Neighborhood Law Corps is putting a face and some muscle into neighborhoods around Oakland. This gang of dedicated legal eagles, an arm of the Oakland City Attorney's office, works with community groups to find solutions to local problems, creating healthier neighborhoods and, in turn, a healthier Oakland.

There was no blueprint for success when Oakland City Attorney John Russo initiated the corps in 2002. This program was, and still is, unique in the country.

"Oakland should be proud of this innovative program, which has gained both

regional and national attention," says Alex Nguyen, executive director of the corps. The League of California Cities agrees, recently awarding the Helen Putnam Award for Excellence to the corps at an annual conference. The award is given to recognize inventive solutions that engage community involvement and enhance public trust.

Working together, the NLC and community groups prioritize problems plaguing their neighborhoods. One of their first cases was a 24-hour gas station, well known in one neighborhood as a local hangout and hub of illegal activities. Rather than having the police go there on

a call-by-call basis, the corps decided to attack the causes of the incidents. Working under the threat of legal action, the business owner reduced store hours, added security officers and agreed to participate in the neighborhood program. The goal of the corps is not to shut down businesses, but to encourage them to be better business operators—and better neighbors.

"They don't just stop the problems," says Jenny Kassan, manager of the Unity Council Inc. "They offer creative solutions for improvement. One establishment [Tampico], which attracted negative activities and was an eyesore for years, has really

cleaned up their act, and their property. They've reduced loitering, and made façade improvements. Now it's one of the most attractive businesses on the block and draws a more diverse crowd."

Oakland resident Mark Daly, involved with the Neighborhood Crime Prevention Council, also supports the work of the corps, and he has seen firsthand the effectiveness of joining forces to create positive change.

"In the past people accepted things, thinking 'that's just the way it is,' so they didn't call the police or get involved. Now the NLC is collaborating with us, and things are getting done," Daly says.

Developing civic leadership skills and promoting the public's trust in city government is one arm of the NLC, but the bite behind the bark comes from the lawyers working with the groups. Most are new graduates who believe that the experiences they gain and the work they do far outweigh their low salaries. The annual program budget is less than \$200,000. Laura Blair, a 2003 UC Berkeley Boalt Hall School of Law graduate, admits that most other top 10 law school graduates are making three times as much as she is.

"It would be nice to be making more money, but it's incredibly rewarding to see the ethic of community participation and activism," she says. One of Blair's cases involved low-income working families in an East Oakland apartment building. Rather than dealing with the complaint of one tenant at a time, Blair took on the entire building.

"Chances are, if one apartment doesn't have heat and is infested with pests, others are, too. These people were all paying market rates for substandard housing," she says.

Securing money for the project within a tight city budget has been tough. Much of the funding has come from foundations and through the fund-raising efforts of law firms such as Wendel, Rosen, Black and Dean. Russo is hopeful that the program will continue, and he is proud of what the partnership of citizens and the corps has accomplished. For more information on the Neighborhood Law Corps, call 238-6628. ■