

Block party celebrates ouster of drug dealers

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By William Brand, STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND – They had a party Saturday afternoon in front of 3025 School St. in the Fruitvale District with balloons, kids running around, barbecue donated by Everett & Jones and a lot of smiles. Drug dealers, not welcome. It was a party that no one living in the area would have believed could happen a few years ago, especially not in front of that house.

This was a block dominated by drug dealers. One Christmas not long ago, a neighbor, Andrew Dibble, said he drove home to find a murder victim slumped in a car outside the drug house.

"Daytime, nighttime, it didn't matter. It was non-stop," he said.

"The grocery store on the corner was all boarded up. It wasn't safe here," Dibble said.

All that has changed dramatically. Fed-up residents formed a neighborhood watch group. They began calling City Hall.

Oakland City Council President Ignacio De La Fuente, who represents the Fruitvale district, signed on. So did City Attorney John Russo.

De la Fuente brought in police, city inspectors and regulators. Russo brought his **Neighborhood Law Corps**, young deputy attorneys, who brought the weight of the courts on the drug house.

Both De La Fuente and Russo attended the block party and praised residents for hanging tough. The city is reclaiming neighborhoods one by one, they said.

The law corps is able to do much more in the courts than residents can with a small claims, nuisance law suit, Russo said.

Laura Blair of the **Neighborhood Law Corps** said attorneys actually filed actions against the owners of three problem houses on the block and won court-ordered restrictions and settlements. The absentee owner of the 3025 School St. house was forced to sell the house. Drug using and drug dealing residents left.

The lawsuit also gave the city jurisdiction over the sale. The new owner was required to live in the house, Blair said.

In fact, neighbors added, the new owner has joined the neighborhood watch.

Down at the corner store, proprietor Ahmed Faiz said he got a \$3,000 loan from the city and put in another \$18,000 to upgrade the store. Now, there are large, clean windows. The store boasts a well-stocked, refrigerated section with fresh fruits and vegetables. The store sells more groceries now, Faiz said. "We want the word to get around, so more people will shop here."

Andretta Fowler, who lives nearby, said the success shows "if people work together, things like this can happen."

Neighbors said the first change came when a minister from Shiloh Christian Fellowship, an Oakland community church, set up a portable organ in front of the drug house and began singing hymns.

"Once her battery ran out and the people in the drug house let her plug into their electricity," a neighbor said.

They didn't know it, but those hymns were writing an obituary for drug dealing on School Street.

"Amen," a neighbor said.