

By Angela Blackburn

OAKVILLE BEAVER STAFF

They're not Ghostbusters, but graffiti busters and they're coming to clean up Kerr Street tomorrow, so step aside or be prepared to get scrubbed.

A group of youths from the Kerr Street community, which has been hard at work at boosting its image of late, will begin at Speers Road and work their way south, said Richard Messer who heads the Kerr Street Community Association (KSCA).

They'll be armed with a 3,500-lb./per square inch power washer, biodegradable chemical detergent, the ability to soda blast, the advice and assistance of graffiti-removal expert Mike Haydeman of Canadian Restoration in Ajax and lots of determination.

The Town has worked closely with the KSCA, local business, residents and other community representatives in coming up with an official "vision" for Kerr Street's future. It has adopted a vision to act as a blueprint or guide in redeveloping Kerr Street as a multi-cultural shopping and dining destination that rivals the downtown Oakville and Bronte Village business districts.

The Town is also investigating the viability of a Business Improvement Area (BIA) for Kerr Street merchants and businesses.

However over the spring months at least one if not more persons has taken to writing graffiti around the area.

"It (graffiti) has not been a major problem, but over the last six months or so someone has taken to writing quite a bit of it," said Messer.

Admitting some of it isn't bad, artistically-speaking — Messer characterizes it as a folk-style graffiti rather than hate or gang-related messages — but it's still been cluttering the neighbourhood.

It was on that note that Ron Shantz who heads Kerr Street Ministries approached Messer with the idea of having about 20 youths in Kerr Street Ministries, and another 10 or so from The Sanctuary church, help with the clean up as a summer project.

“We have run a youth program for Kerr Street Ministries for the last year and a bit. It's an extension of the Kerr Street day camp. Some of the youths are at risk and some have got a history within the community,” said Shantz.

“There's been some concern that some of the Kerr Street youths have done the graffiti, but there's none that we're aware of. What we, and they, wanted to do, as a good community gesture was to clean it up,” said Shantz.

Messer, who operates Connectus Communications Canada in the Kerr area, then contacted an acquaintance, Haydeman, who just opened his new business and is willing to do the good deed for the exposure it will bring his company.

Haydeman, who Shantz describes as a graffiti-removal expert, agreed to bring his equipment, including biodegradable detergent, to town to help out with the job of cleaning up the graffiti.

With the machine and muscle power of all those involved, the hard-to-remove graffiti won't stand much of a chance.

“We've got the expert and we'll provide some of the elbow grease,” said Shantz.

Messer said that tomorrow, the group, including the youths led by Kerr Street Ministries youth director Rebekah Wergeland, will start out at Speers Road and will work its way south, removing graffiti as it goes.

Messer said that the presence of graffiti draws a mixed reaction from the public.

Some, like business owners and police, believe it's an eyesore and a threat to the social and economic well-being of the area.

Halton Regional Police Constable Ellie Van Vliet, who is the Kerr Street Village Constable, told the Beaver earlier this spring that graffiti lends to the neighbourhood the impression of "disorder and decay" and is particularly detrimental when so much time, money and energy is being funneled into improving the area.

Van Vliet said many mention it to her when she's walking her beat.

Sgt. Ray Bruce, who oversees Halton Crime Stoppers said graffiti was a minor problem when he patrolled Kerr just over a year ago, but said he's been surprised at the extent of the graffiti there now.

There are of course, the usual graffiti messages protesting war and police, but this spring, a proliferation of graffiti became apparent thanks to what appeared to be the arrival of at least two prolific artists.

One renders a cartoon-like character that's been described as everything from a ghost to an elephant. Another offers intricate and distinctive words which police say is akin to a signature.

Many merchants believe the graffiti hurts business, by giving a poor image and deterring people from visiting the area.

They've also been disheartened to see it after all the work that has gone into giving the area a facelift.

Over the past few years, the KSCA and its local member businesses has worked with students from Appleby College in planting flowers in planter boxes along Kerr Street.

There have also been community clean-ups of the area and special events like a Christmas tree lighting ceremony last season.

Police say graffiti is often less about art than it is about annoying people or soliciting a reaction.

Those responsible can be charged with mischief or trespassing.

So far the culprits involved in Kerr Street's new bout of graffiti haven't been caught. It's believed they're not from Oakville, according to Shantz.

Earlier this year Messer and Van Vliet attended a graffiti seminar with Toronto Police Staff Sgt. Heinz Kuck where the economic toll of graffiti was discussed.

In 2003, the total spent in Canada on all aspects of graffiti (from cleanup to courts) was \$1.4 billion. In the United States it was \$15 billion and globally it's estimated \$50 billion was spent.

Messer said he learned public reaction to graffiti is mixed — some want to eradicate it, some would leave it and the rest don't care either way.

Van Vliet told the Beaver there's a "struggle" to get a consensus to remove graffiti, particularly by absentee landlords.

The Town is only obligated to remove graffiti from its own facilities. Police aren't responsible for removing it.

Van Vliet pegged it a "community responsibility."

That responsibility will be met tomorrow by the youths and it appears no one will stand in their way.

Shantz said a crew was out visiting Kerr Street businesses

Monday and none of the merchants objected to having graffiti removed from their property by the youths.

- with files from Howard Mozel

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