

By Angela Blackburn  
OAKVILLE BEAVER STAFF

In the ongoing community effort to give Kerr Street a facelift, the community had its face washed Thursday. A team of 30 youths assisted in the job of power washing graffiti from the walls of shops and businesses. The job began shortly after 9 a.m. and didn't wrap up until nearly 5 p.m. after 16 mural-sized graffiti "tags" were removed.

"There was a lot of activity on the street and people were saying "yeah" and it was a very solid move forward for the Kerr Street community," said Richard Messer of the Kerr Street Community Association (KSCA).

Messer organized the day along with Ron Shantz who heads up Kerr Street Ministries (KSM).

Youths from KSM, and others visiting KSM from Raleigh, North Carolina, as well as others from The Sanctuary church, all pitched in to help.

"We removed 16 actual graffiti tags that were mural-sized. Everybody got involved. There was window cleaning done, assignments given out and evaluations made on some of the graffiti that couldn't be removed," said Messer.

Two graffiti tags, one on the Treasure Island Bookstore, were found to be on painted surfaces.

"If we'd taken the power washer to a painted surface, we'd have made more of a mess," said Messer.

Instead, youths have arranged with the landlords of the buildings to return to both sites to paint over the graffiti and remove it that way.

Messer said that job will be done in the short term.

Graffiti-removal expert Mike Haydeman of Canadian Restoration in Ajax donated his assistance and equipment, including a 3,500-lb./per square inch power washer, biodegradable chemical detergent, and the ability to soda blast, to the job.

Haydeman said it was good exposure for his new business and a chance to help out both the community and those who've helped him get started in his own business.

The clean-up covered all the ground on Kerr Street, north of Lakeshore Road to Speers Road and even included the Oaktown Plaza north of Speers, according to Messer.

"We drove up and down the street and kept our eyes open for graffiti," he said.

All those involved were treated to a barbecue dinner at KSM after the job was done.

"We want to keep the message positive," said Messer.

The Kerr Street community has been working diligently over the last several years to boost its image.

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 recently adopted that plan as a guide to 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.

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 each spring.

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

Those working hard to change the appearance and image of Kerr Street took a hit this spring however when it's believed a couple of prolific graffiti artists hit the street. Graffiti had appeared in a big way and was seen by many as a blight on the street's appearance and not much help in attracting shoppers and visitors to the area.

Messer characterized it as a folk-style graffiti rather than hate or gang-related messages, but it still detracted from the community.

That's when Shantz approached Messer with the idea of having about 20 youths in KSM and another 10 or so from The Sanctuary church, help with the clean up as a summer project.

KSM runs a summer program that's an extension of the Kerr Street day camp. Some of the youths attending are at risk and some have got a history within the community, according to Shantz.

Shantz also told the Beaver there had been some concern that local youths may have been involved in the graffiti's appearance. While that has never been proved, Shantz said KSM believed lending a hand with a clean-up would be a good gesture to the community by the youths.

Armed with the determination, the willpower, elbow grease and the right equipment, Kerr Street was cleaned up again in a day.

It's been found that the presence of graffiti draws a mixed reaction from the public.

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 last spring that graffiti lends the impression of "disorder and decay" to the community and is hindering the community's effort to improve.

Sgt. Ray Bruce, who oversees Halton Crime Stoppers said graffiti was a minor problem on Kerr Street, but had recently become more apparent.

While the usual graffiti messages about war and police could be found, two images have been recurring in the area. One was a cartoon-like character that's been described as everything from a ghost to an elephant and another that's been deemed by police to be akin to a signature.

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.

To date, the culprits involved in Kerr Street's recent bout of graffiti haven't been caught, but Shantz said it's believed they're not from Oakville.

Messer and Van Vliet attended a graffiti seminar earlier this year where they heard that in 2003, a total \$1.4 billion was spent in Canada on everything from cleaning up graffiti to pursuing prosecution in the court.

Another \$15 billion was spent in the United States, and it's estimated the price tag is \$50 billion world-wide.

It can be difficult to achieve the removal of graffiti since the cost falls to the victim.

It could be an additional cost for businesses and even a low priority for absentee landlords.

The Town of Oakville is only obligated to remove graffiti from its own facilities and police can't be held responsible for removing it.

The effort this week on Kerr Street saw the community rally to make it a community responsibility.

Shantz said a crew was out visiting Kerr Street businesses Monday to let them know the clean-up effort was coming and no one objected to having the assistance.

- with files from Howard Mozel

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