
Primal Scream -- A Perspective on Being Proactive in Vallejo -- Chris Stefano - 5/4/14

A Perspective on Being

Proactive in Vallejo

By Chris Stefano
5/4/14

I moved to Vallejo from San Francisco almost 13 years ago. I was completely unprepared for the vast cultural differences I would encounter. We had bought into the idea of a Waterfront Redevelopment Plan and a bright new future for this city. We came with high expectations for ourselves and our community. For the first time in our lives, we encountered people who did not share those values. My expectations in the face of my daily experiences and the foreclosure crisis crumbled quickly.

My house is flanked by a few rental properties. A year after our arrival one house was occupied by a drug addict who rented out every available space to homeless people. The garage, a boat in the driveway, the basement, all had a constant stream of occupants. The garbage piled up in the yard and even overflowed into a neighbor's yard. The police told us they could do nothing. No one complained, no neighbors said a thing. It was just accepted. I was embarrassed to have people visit. I still am.

Another neighbor allowed a homeless man to live in her driveway and hustle work fixing cars. My street filled with cars needing work and down and out people hanging out or working on them. Vans of homeless people started parking on our street at night. Frustrated at the garbage and the characters I came home to, I unsuccessfully confronted the neighbor. We then turned to Vallejo Fighting Back Partnership. Bob Sampayan told us to call the landlord and he responded by threatening eviction if the auto repair continued. I was accused of trying to get a woman evicted and was threatened with a lawsuit.

I joined the Vallejo Heights Neighborhood Association and they also encouraged me to work with code enforcement. The concept was that it's not our job to police our neighborhood, but we can get the people whose job it is, to do their job. In this way, we can fight to improve our quality of life.

However, what no one told me is that while the threat of a fine or eviction may temporarily halt an activity, the values of the people fined don't change. From the point of view of the problem neighbors, it was none of my business if they filled the street with garbage or repaired cars. From their point of view, they did no wrong. That's how they have always lived their lives.

They have grown up in a Vallejo where people did not take pride in their homes and no one expected more. What was upsetting to them was someone trying to keep the street clean and make the neighborhood a nice place to come home to and making them clean up. Why did I not just mind my own business?

A few years later, the drug addicts were replaced with another tenant who started collecting garbage and repairing cars. This time the piles of junk were even worse and as the guy is an extremely hard worker, the scale of the work increased. Nothing was ever thrown away, just piled up and garbage thrown on the ground and blew down the street. Piles started appearing along the rail tracks at the end of our street.

We repeated the process that had worked before . We did not want to walk out the door and see piles of garbage or a truck parked in the flowers we had planted. Contact with the landlord failed, so we went to code enforcement. We were tired of 12 years of this. It worked , after much difficulty, the business was moved elsewhere. The property was cleaned and looked better than it had in years. Then my front picture window was shot out. Then the other was shot out. I've been screamed at, threatened, accused of everything under the sun. I thought people would be happy to have a clean street. I was shocked to find they just didn't care . I was told that I was a liar, that what I was doing was against the law. I was threatened with law suits, assault and restraining orders by people who had no clear idea of the law or their own rights. I was the unreasonable one, I was the jerk in their eyes. This is the consequence of me being proactive.

The good neighbors on the other streets in our St. Francis neighborhood knew something was going on. But they feared what eventually happened to me would happen to them: Reprisal by people who don't like to be told that they can't do whatever they want wherever they want. No one gets involved, people live in fear of reprisal. The long term neighbors keep to themselves and say nothing. They, perhaps wisely, just accept what is happening.

If you decide to improve the quality of life by using Code Enforcement against problem neighbors, there will be consequences. Even if in the short term, they clean up or are forced to curb the behavior, they will hate you. Even if the law is on your side, they will not care. They will just feel disrespected and marginalized as you have taken away their power. They do not take responsibility for their impact in the community. It is not and never will be on their radar.

It's been four years since we've been burglarized and I was motivated to do something, anything to improve our lives here. I did all the things I was told to do . We have a neighborhood watch, an alarm system, a camera system. My goal was until I can move, I will work hard to improve where we are. We have fantastic new neighbors who keep moving in. They are scared of being burgled and they are experiencing the culture clash between those with of expectations and the culture of higher expectations. Vallejo is a broken city that is being fixed by valiant people working very hard. But the reality is , that what may seem normal in another city , is not normal here. By being proactive, we put ourselves in danger. When you tell someone they can't let their squalor impact the neighborhood , they don't have a change of heart and say "I should be a better neighbor!" They say, that guy should mind his business or he's going to get what's coming to him.

For all that I've tried ,it's made the neighborhood no better . The people who make it unsafe and unpleasant are not going anywhere any time soon. The values of Code Enforcement , which are really middle class values, are not shared by many of the occupants of the city.

I wish someone had told me as they were advising me to take the course that I took.

Note: All opinions expressed in the "Primal Scream" column are those of the writer and not necessarily those of the Vallejo Independent Bulletin.