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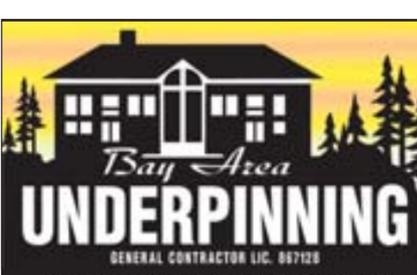
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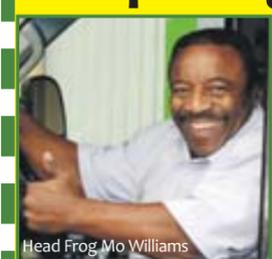
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Police: Prevention is key to stemming burglaries in Lamorinda communities

By Cathy Dausman

Are residential burglaries on the rise in Lamorinda?

"It does seem that way," says Orinda police Chief Mark Nagel, before adding that Orinda's numbers prove otherwise. When Nagel compared statistics for the first two months last year against this year it was nearly "even Steven" he said, with nine reported burglaries in 2016 and eight in 2017.

Burglary, defined as entering a building illegally with the intent to commit theft, is always a hot topic, Nagel said. He says his department has worked with law enforcement agencies from Oakland to the South Bay to solve burglary crimes.

Most frustrating for Nagel are the instances when residents are home or arrive home to confront a burglary in progress, and homeowners are at risk of bodily harm. Nagel said burglar alarms and motion lights are good deterrents; even creating a "safe room" within the house buys time and allows for help to arrive. Security cameras are also an effective crime deterrent; Nagel updated the Orinda City Council on their use on public streets at the March 21 council meeting.

Lafayette residents experienced an unexplained downturn in burglaries in 2016, said police Chief Eric Christensen. Four years ago the city reported six to 10 burglaries per month. His department handled only three total cases this year in January and February; two are already solved. Still, there is an increased concern about burglaries and crime in general, and that, Christensen says is a good thing:

"Are people paying attention (to crime stats)? Yes!" Home burglaries peak when the price of gold rises; they are also cyclical, Christensen says, increasing when people vacation during summer and winter holidays and homes are empty.



Security camera image of a car involved in a robbery in Lafayette on March 21st. Photo provided

Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda police departments each offer vacation home checks, and will notify homeowners if something is amiss.

Although Christensen, King and Nagel were all willing to discuss statistics and as-yet unsolved cases, they much preferred to educate the public about preventing burglaries. Each shared frustration over the simple things left undone which act as an open invitation to crooks. For example, King said Moraga experienced about 40 auto burglaries during the summer of 2015, each of which occurred on unlocked vehicles. The same is true for residential burglaries. Homeowners may intentionally leave doors unlocked, place a key under the mat for service worker access, open windows or fail to activate burglar alarms.

"The perception is we're living in a bubble (in Lamorinda)," said Nagel, "and it's just not true." In fact the same "location, location, location" that realtors love to tout is also attractive to would-be burglars. They love a home with easy freeway access. An empty house

For more information:

Preventing residential burglaries (Lafayette police):

www.lovelafayette.org/city-hall/city-departments/police

Moraga vacation check request: <https://secure.blueoctane.net/forms/Staying-Safe-in-Orinda>:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-hUUzWK3S4&feature=youtu.be

is attractive too, for all the wrong reasons. A home with doors and windows hidden behind shrubbery and insufficient outdoor lighting provides a burglar the cover of darkness and leisure time to break in away from neighbors' prying eyes. Nagel cites one burglary case where the intruder(s) simply walked through an open back door.

Crooks gained entry from the rear of a home in 86 percent of last year's Lafayette home burglaries, Christensen says, so the No. 1 preventative action a homeowner can take is to lock their backyard gates. Not a single home with locked gates was burglarized in Lafayette in 2016. Conversely a previously burglarized house is more likely to be burglarized again.

King, Nagel and Christensen explained that each one of them is in the crime prevention business. "If something can be prevented, I'm a happy camper," said King. "Even one (burglary) is too many for me," echoed Nagel. "California is the land of opportunity," Christensen said, before adding that should not apply to burglars.

How to dispose of an unwanted gun

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King said Lamorinda residents might discover a forgotten gun while cleaning out an elderly relative's home or come across a gun abandoned on a hillside. Safe handling practices evolved quickly after a gun stolen in 2015 in San Francisco from a Bureau of Land Management officer's personal vehicle resulted in the death of a bystander. California law now requires firearms in a vehicle to be secured in the trunk or in a locked container stored out of sight. Because of that Moraga police department is providing its officers with lock boxes to secure their department-issued firearm, King said. Lafayette and Orinda police do likewise.

Today when you purchase a firearm from a licensed gun dealer, you must either declare the make and model of the gun safe in which it will be stored or purchase a gun lock. "Many manufacturers supply a gun lock with the firearm (purchase)," King said. But sometimes safe handling means "hands off."

"Kids are curious," King said, and teaching them to treat guns with safety and respect starts when they are 5 or 6 years old. Officer Robert Ortiz, who processed my shotgun surrenders, says both children and adults ask if they can handle his handgun; the answer is always "no". He thinks of his gun

as a tool, but he thinks twice before unholstering it, because he is responsible for locating every casing of every round (bullet) he fires.

I began my visit by notifying the front desk — empty handedly — that I wanted to turn in a gun. Ortiz accompanied me to the car, where he retrieved the shotgun from the trunk. He carried it to a sand-filled metal tube, placed the barrel inside and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened, as we had hoped. That meant the chamber was empty. He broke it open and carried it inside, where it was bagged and tagged. I supplied my name, address and birthdate, and the gun was placed in an evidence locker. Grandpa's shotgun plus an air rifle and BB rifle surrendered earlier will go to a site in the central valley and be melted down.

In addition to accepting unwanted firearms or ammunition each Lamorinda police department offers free gun cable locks. All anyone has to do is ask an officer or stop by the department, Orinda police Chief Mark Nagel said.

Lafayette police Chief Eric Christensen says that maintain-

ing a firearm in a home is a very large responsibility. "It's just not enough to hide the gun; the gun has to be secured while you are away from your home. I cannot think of a more terrible thing than for a burglar to get lucky by finding a gun and taking it with them, and then have the gun used in a crime. Everyone should ensure their firearms are locked up and inaccessible to thieves or others," he said. "We recover a lot of handguns that have been taken in other crimes. Lock them up," Christensen said.

"Treat every gun as if it is loaded, and treat it with respect," King said, adding that firearm safety is everybody's responsibility. With certain exceptions, it is unlawful to fire or discharge a firearm within Lafayette, Moraga or Orinda (ordinances 9.04.020, 9.12.020 and 8-602 respectively). And if you decide you no longer want a gun? "Call us," King said. Disposal is safe and free, no appointment necessary.

Note: Lock and disable any gun before surrendering it to police; keep it safely out of sight in your vehicle, and alert police empty handedly. An officer will retrieve it.

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<http://www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0626/Gun-Ownership-in-Lamorinda-Safety-number-one-concern-among-local-police.html>