

Watchful eyes key to crime prevention

By Zach Potter
Co-editor

When Evit Blackmon moved to Durham with his wife Yolanda in 2008, he did not expect to take the reigns of the neighborhood watch in his community.

But two years ago, after a breaking and entering incident occurred a little too close to home, he did just that.

"We're simply homeowners that care about their community," Blackmon, 39, said. "Whether I was part of this or not, I would still be doing the same things I'm doing now. I think that's how we became what you would call the leaders of the neighborhood watch."

As the block captain, Blackmon is responsible for keeping the channels of communication open among members of his community in Brightleaf at the Park as well as to and from the Durham Police Department.

But instead of relying on the "phone book tree" of his parents' generation, Blackmon's neighborhood has modernized the process and adapted it to social media.

"If there is suspicious activity that someone has noticed in the neighborhood, it is instantly posted on nextdoor.com," Blackmon said.

To set up a neighborhood watch in your community, check with neighbors to see if there is any interest and contact your community resource unit officer. The contact information for the CRU officer of each district can be found here: <http://durhamnc.gov/ich/op/DPD/Pages/CPOfficers.aspx>

If you would like to get involved, PAC-1 meetings are a great way to have your voice heard by the Durham Police Department. District 1 meetings take place on the third Saturday of each month from 9:30 to 11:30 a.m. at the Holton Career Center located at 41 North Driver St. <http://durhamnc.gov/ich/op/DPD/Pages/PAC.aspx>



Evit Blackmon, right, meets with Kimberle Walker and Curtis Knight at the DPD Substation on Holloway Drive. Due to restricted resources, Knight is the only community resource officer for Blackmon's district. Staff photo by Zach Potter.

"Neighborhood watch is essential to any law enforcement agency's efforts towards community policing."

Kimberle Walker

Blackmon describes Nextdoor as a neighborhood listserv. His community uses it to send and receive information about suspicious activity quickly to phones, tablets and computers.

But what constitutes suspicious activity? According to Curtis Knight, the community resource unit officer for District 1, "Everybody has a different suspicious level. What's suspicious to me may not be suspicious to you. I always try to tell people, 'If it doesn't feel right, sit back and call 911.' I tell them not to go out trying to apprehend bad guys; to get us clothing description, vehicle description, direction traveled, time of day."

District 1, which is based in the Cleveland Holloway neighborhood, covers much of East Durham. Blackmon takes care to note the risk of bias in assessing threats.

"There's a line people need to be aware of as far as profiling, as going a step too far as a concerned citizen," Blackmon said.

"I try to encourage people to be careful how they go about classifying people as suspicious."

Blackmon echoes Knight's suggestion not to attempt to follow, question or detain individuals. "It keeps things from really

escalating," he said.

Blackmon's duties with the neighborhood watch extend beyond reporting suspicious activity. He also takes advantage of Nextdoor to notify fellow residents about Partners Against Crime meetings, which take place on the third Saturday of each month.

"In order for communities to keep their neighborhood watch sign up, they are required to attend 25 percent of PAC meetings every year, which is at least four," Knight said. "If they don't, we come and take the sign down."

Kimberle Walker, 46, serves as the senior public affairs specialist and has been with the department since 2005. She is responsible for coordinating the community relations efforts across the various districts. Walker recognizes that neighborhood watches and leaders like Blackmon play a pivotal role in reducing crime and making efficient use of police resources.

"Neighborhood watch is essential to any law enforcement agency's efforts towards community policing," she said.

"Officers don't live on every street or in every home. The residents living in the neighborhoods know the community best. All the training in the world is good, but what that citizen has to offer us, their knowledge about the community, is invaluable. That is actually the best weapon we have."