

# Graffiti Prevention, Part I

Host: Lee Alpert  
In-Studio Guests: Timothy Kephart, Graffiti Expert  
Joeann Valle, Vice President, Harbor City Neighborhood Council  
Video Clip Guest: Timothy Kephart

Lee: We're here to talk about graffiti today. We're very pleased to have with us two specialists in graffiti. Our first guest's name is Joeann Valley, Vice President of the Harbor City Neighborhood Council, and our second guest is Tim Kephart. Tim is a graffiti expert. Let's begin the program by first finding out about Joeann's Neighborhood Council. Tell us, what it represents and where Harbor City is located. As a resident of Los Angeles, I know how difficult it is to find locations in this town.

Joeann: Thank you Lee. You look very familiar to me. Perhaps you might have chaired the Board of Neighborhood Commission at one time?

Lee: You've been set up! Yes, I was very pleased, Joeann, to be the first Chair of the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners when Mayor Riordan was in office. He brought forth the whole Neighborhood Councils system and I was very pleased to help as a Commissioner.

Joeann: Thank you for that information. Harbor City is in the Harbor area of the City of Los Angeles and we're just north of San Pedro and west of Wilmington. In our 3.5 square miles we have about 23,000 people that we represent. The Neighborhood Council was born three years ago, after a long and hard year of formation, but it was a year that was very exciting and continues to be very exciting. I was fortunate enough to be one of these folks who actually formed that Neighborhood Council.

Lee: Congratulations and Neighborhood Council as we all knew, do wonderful things for the city! They get our communities involved, our residents involved, who otherwise would not, and also let the residents and the businesses in the local communities decide what's going to happen in their community because every community is different and has a different need. Joeann you have brought this gentleman with you, Tim Kephart.

Tim tell us a little about the issue that we're talking about, graffiti. We all know that the City of Los Angeles, as other major cities do, suffer from disfigurements of city buildings, single family residences, and businesses. It's awfully hard to feel good about your community when you have taggers and gangs messing up everything that you've tried to make look good. Tim, how did you get into this line of work and exactly what is it that you do?

Timothy: Thank you. This started in 2000, where there was a grant to fill in a position for one of the neighboring cities. With that grant they wanted to go in and examine one of the graffiti problems. Like you have stated, many of cities throughout the United States are spending millions of dollars just removing graffiti. This city in particular wanted to take a more proactive look and see what was the actual problem they were experiencing. What we had done was started prototyping every piece of graffiti throughout the city and then these images were sent over. I was responsible for analyzing all of those and then it evolved from that point to the point

where we were able to create an intelligence database. We found that there was a lot graffiti intelligence that was contained within these messages that were written up on the walls. A lot of cities quickly remove graffiti from walls or buildings, feeding into that eradicating pattern of removal. The way that we're different is that we have recognized that graffiti is part of a larger picture. There is a lot of intelligence information contained in it and that intelligence information can lead to apprehending and prosecuting the criminals

Lee: That's wonderful help for our cities. You brought with you a tape that we want to segue. We want to show our viewers what exactly it is that you do. This video clip will show us exactly what it is that you do and how it helps the police department.

<<Video clip>>

Timothy: What we do is we work with the Neighborhood Council. We're funded by the Neighborhood Council, and what we do is track and analyze the graffiti in their area. More specifically we track the graffiti in the Harbor area of Los Angeles and the Harbor City Neighborhood Council. We first come out and have all the graffiti in the Harbor City photographed and documented. Once that's done we'll take that information, analyze that information, extract all the intelligence information out of that, and be able to use that to provide those intelligence reports for law enforcement, for city officials, and anybody that may need it to go and help eradicate the problem of graffiti here in Harbor City.

This is a good example here to illustrate the kind of "cat and mouse game" that takes place between graffiti abatement crews and vandals. You can see that this wall has been painted over here and then it got painted over again, and they entered the second time and it got painted yet again. Even though Harbor City has a very aggressive graffiti abatement program and the City of Los Angeles has an aggressive abatement program, the problem that you run into is when you're not tracking the graffiti. You continuously play this "cat and mouse game" between the vandals and the abatement teams. With this new program that Harbor City will be installing, we'll actually be able to track this graffiti and this piece of graffiti here even though he might continually put this graffiti back up again. We'll be able to track it and follow it, and then go after that individual for prosecution and hold accountable for all the damage they are doing.

This is an example of gang graffiti. The reason why it's important to track this is because there's a lot of intelligence information that can be discerned from this piece of graffiti right here. For example, you have the initials of the gang here to the left, but then to the right you have two nicknames or monikers: "Villain and Kraper." What's important to notice about that is these monikers are what we distinguish as being "role call" graffiti. Those two monikers mean that those two people were here or the one person at the top was here putting up the graffiti. How that becomes beneficial to law enforcement is that it allows us to be able to go and look and see who are the individuals that are the most active in the gang because you might have a gang that has three, four, five hundred people on file being as far as members, but you're not gonna have all 500 active people at one time. What you may have is your more active individuals here and this where the "role call" comes in because you can start to isolate who are the most active individuals and then it can be used later on for investigative purposes. We can go and determine who's hanging out together, who's committing crimes together, who's going and putting up graffiti together. It has a lot of useful information even though a lot of times it's just quickly removed by a graffiti abatement crew.

Some additional intelligence information that can be discerned from this is, take a look at the "C" here. The individual put this up, crossed the "C" out, and the reason being is *that* particular gang is warning with a rival gang and that particular gang—their letters starting with

the letter C. As a form of disrespect to that gang, they'll cross out the letter C even though they still write it up. That, again, shows to illustrate how much entrenched the gang members are and how much they hate other gangs and rival gangs.

This is an example of the other type of graffiti that's commonly seen in Los Angeles County, *tagging graffiti*. You can see the moniker here, "LAWS". There's two different types of taggers. There's a tagger that's gonna go on and be part of a tagging crew, and there's a tagger that's by himself; they commonly refer to themselves as a "oner". We can tell here that this individual is a "oner" because after his moniker "laws" goes and puts a "one" around his graffiti. What that tells us, and what that lets us do for an investigative standpoint, is we can actually track his individual graffiti. We could also track the location or locations of where he puts up his graffiti.

This is an example of what we would consider or classify as "threatening gang graffiti". Now clearly you have the gang name here and they wrote up the rival gang name, crossed it out with an X and then put 187. 187 corresponds to the California Criminal Code for murder. By putting something like this up, essentially what they're saying, is they don't like this gang and they want to kill members from this gang. It's a very good, useful piece of intelligence information because it lets us know not only who is being threatened, but it also lets us know what gangs aren't getting along with one another or where there might be some ensuing conflict.

<<End video clip>>

Lee: Tim, this is very useful information. I know you're not law enforcement so, what qualifies you to be able to do the things that you do? For example, reading the gang signs? What's your background, your education in training?

Timothy: My training started back in 2000 when I was working for the City of Carson in a grant-funded position. I examined, at that point, well over 10,000 graffiti images. As time went on and on, I just started learning more and more about tracking graffiti better and better. It was that continual repetition where I started to learn how to read the graffiti. I actually got a Master's Degree in Criminal Justice and my thesis was basically on analyzing gang graffiti, specifically, it was about some of the intelligence information we talked about in the segment there. In the City of Carson my main goal was to address their graffiti problem in a proactive manner. I started going out interviewing individuals in the field, gang members and taggers as well. I began learning more and more about their culture and subculture, which now existed in their point of view now.

Lee: You've got great experience and we appreciate you bringing it back to Los Angeles to help resolve some of our problems here in Los Angeles. Let's transition to how you, Tim, grew to become connected to the Harbor City Neighborhood Council. Joeann, you are Vice President of Neighborhood Councils, Executive Director of your Chamber of Commerce in Harbor City and Harbor Gateway. What does graffiti do to your communities? Do we really need somebody like Tim or should it just be left alone?

Joeann: No! We really need someone like Tim to help us. We really need to have the graffiti removed, but more importantly—stopped. I think that's the key is to actually stop those crooks and have them arrested. It becomes a real problem in a community because it's an image problem that tells visiting and residing members that this is a gang ridden territory. Businesses are really not anxious to conduct or have a business where there's a lot of graffiti because they're concerned being able to do business. Also, their employees have a fear of the territory. That's really a downer that we see.

Lee: It sure does. Your point Joeann has a scientific one, as well. Tim, you mentioned that you have a Master's Degree in Criminal Justice. In Criminal Justice there's this theory called "the broken window" theory. It's a valid theory that we hear from our City Council members, our former police chief who is now City Council member Bernard Parks, and our City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo. Can you explain it if you can? What is the theory and how is it applicable to all neighborhoods in Los Angeles?

Timothy: Broken windows was developed in the 1970's. What broken windows theory is a theory that states that if neighborhoods have run-down conditions, broken windows, vacant buildings with broken windows on them, graffiti on them, trash, and homeless, those type of things that people don't normally want in their neighborhoods, and people allow these things to persist then these things will lead and result in other criminal activity. What the neighbors are saying to the criminals when these things keep on persisting is that the community doesn't have good guardianship of that neighborhood. That's clearly a good target to go and do other types of criminal activity in that community.

The problem with that and with graffiti is that some of these cities have adopted that anti-graffiti problem or that anti-graffiti thought. What they end up doing is they remove the graffiti as quickly as possible, but as a community we have to go beyond broken windows in the sense that you cannot just go and quickly remove the graffiti. You have to actually track it because otherwise, essentially what you're doing is just saying, 'Well I've gotta spend \$400,000 a year to remove graffiti. That's the cost for the city and like I said before, you are just playing the cat and mouse game.

Lee: Right. What you're essentially suggesting is that we should make the maximum use out of it, get the intelligence you need, and then remove it.

Timothy: Absolutely. Graffiti should be removed as quickly as possible.

Lee: It makes a very different look for a community, as you said before Joeann, that isn't plagued by graffiti. Joeann, how has Harbor City engaged him or has Harbor City engaged him to work with you?

Joeann: We have an agreement between Tim and us that he will track graffiti. He's also committed to the LAPD Harbor Division. More specifically, he's working with Gang Alternative Program, which is our local nonprofit agency that paints out the graffiti. These three entities are working together, which is what I think that the Neighborhood Council needs to do. They are a force that works with all different entities to get things accomplished. It's a win-win situation.

At the Neighborhood Council we don't think that graffiti is ever gonna go away, but it certainly is going to improve the condition of Harbor City and make people want to come to their work if we have people like Tim helping us. Hopefully, we'll get people to start their business there, and become involved in Harbor City because they have a feel that it's a clean community.

Lee: Graffiti is a fascinating subject that many of us don't know about it and many of us don't know how our Neighborhood Councils could help. Tim has already explained to us how he could keep track of graffiti, but what do you do specifically when you get the information? Do you take a photograph, do you call the police and wait for them to come out, or do you take it to them?

Timothy: That's actually a very interesting question because one of the things that comes up is, with regards to graffiti, is that it is one of the most prevalent crimes out there that if it were to be

fully 100 percent investigated you would overwhelm the resources. What we end up doing is we go and we actually get the graffiti documented and the photographs available. Then we create an intelligence form, what we call the Gates program, a graffiti analysis intelligence tracking software. What we do with the Gates program is we take the intelligence information and put into the software and then it comes out we have some reports that we generate and we feed those reports to law enforcement. Hypothetically what might end up happening is we may have say, for example, we'll have a individual gang that has many monikers that have had 10, 20, 30 different locations, so what we'll do with that information is we'll forward that on to law enforcement. Law enforcement will go ahead and say, "We know who these individual are." Then we can go and map that graffiti out and create the nexus between where the graffiti is located, the individual's house and then expect to find some sort of graffiti related materials in the house and then get the judge to give us a search warrant to find those types of materials that we would expect to find. That's one example of how it can be used.

One good thing with the Harbor City area is that the LAPD Harbor Division and the City Attorney's office has their, Gang District Attorney's Office. What they basically do is they do gang injunctions and things related to gangs. They can also use this intelligence information, not only for getting more gang injunctions, but also for enforcing them as well.

Lee: I think you're talking about you neighborhood prosecutor's program, perhaps through the City Attorney's office or through the District Attorney's Office?

Joeann: This is a program that came up through the Los Angeles City Attorney's Office where one City Attorney works on gang injunctions. It really has improved as far as gang activity. When we can link them sentences are enhanced because of this program.

Lee: I know that the current mayor Hahn started the gang injunctions when he was City Attorney, and Rocky Delgadillo who has now taken over has expanded it and put neighborhood prosecutors in each community, so they can address the issues and make the proper contacts.

Joeann, tell us a little about your Neighborhood Council's relationship with the police department. They're so busy now and they are so understaffed even though they are trying to do a great job in our community and under chief Bratton developed new programs and new methods of operations. They are supposed to help relieve the fewer police officers that we have and we should. Do we respond to graffiti? Is it a priority to them or are other things more important? How does your Neighborhood Council work with the police department to try and deal with this?

Joeann: We're really fortunate to have Captain Pat Gannon whom when we sat down and met with Tim, Captain Gannon, and our Neighborhood Prosecutor Plessey and the Executive Director of the nonprofit, GAP. We sat down with them and when the Captain saw that the Neighborhood Council was going to commit this money to try to make the community better he also had committed to an officer that works strictly with Tim on the graffiti issue. We have really good response and of course we want them to respond to someone being murdered. That's their first priority, but by actually assigning this officer you see that they're really serious about this and there's a level of mutual respect between the Neighborhood Council and the police department.

Lee: Building those relationships is very important. The officer doesn't only do graffiti, he or she does all of the work that a normal police officer does, right?

Timothy: Correct.

Lee: What would you tell other Neighborhood Councils that are trying to combat graffiti? Because graffiti isn't a matter if you live in the Harbor or you live in the Valley or you live in East LA or in South LA, it's a problem all over the city. It's not just limited to one particular area. What would you tell the Neighborhood Councils they should do in order to help combat this issue?

Joeann: Contact Tim and his program. We're really hoping to get this program citywide. My first suggestion for those Neighborhood Councils who are looking to alleviate graffiti in their community is to realize how important it is for that graffiti to be removed from that community. Then contact Tim.

Lee: If you're viewing the show and you want to know how to contact them it's real simple. Just contact the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment. You can contact them by dialing 3-1-1. That's the toll free number for getting information on any city services. You can get in touch with Tim by calling Joeann at the Harbor City Harbor Gateway Chamber of Commerce or the Harbor City Neighborhood Council. There's another program called "van-graf." What is that?

Timothy: The van-graf is what we call a vandalism/graffiti reduction program and that's essentially the program that's really being implemented in Harbor City and was implemented in the City of Carson where Carson actually experienced about an average of a 32% decrease in graffiti vandalism since the program's inception. Van-graf really is the main comprising part of the whole thing. The Gates software, the intelligence tracking, are all just little components, but the overall program is called van-graf.

Lee: Who does the graffiti removal? How is that coordinated? Through the LAPD or through the Neighborhood Council?

Joeann: That's why we have this wonderful organization, the Gang Alternative Program, as we commonly call GAP. They contract with the city and they remove the graffiti on a daily basis. They have crews that will go into each of the communities and they drive around; they actually drive around spotting graffiti and they have all the paint right on their truck and they just get out and paint up the graffiti. It's a wonderful partnership between the Neighborhood Councils and their local resources. As Neighborhood Councils we have to build relationships with not only city departments, but nonprofits too. This is an excellent way that it's a triangle relationship between the Neighborhood Council, the LAPD and GAP.

Lee: Do they know to contact you before they remove the graffiti or do they take photos of it and then turn it over to you to interpret? How does that work so that we're not losing that valuable evidence?

Timothy: What we do is set a program in place where the graffiti will still be in track, yet the graffiti is also being quickly removed.

Lee: Joeann, what's happened to your community now that we've had this great program and Tim and the GAP people are removing the graffiti? Has there been a change, is it a change in just the way people feel? Are businesses re-opening? Are they doing more business? Are people free to go? Or does it take a long time? Does it really not have that kind of an impact?

Joeann: It's really too soon to tell. Tim just started the program and so we really have not quite gotten off the ground with it yet, but we should be at the end of the month. We're hoping to get the great results that the City of Carson experienced. We're also hoping to bring in economic development in the area.

Lee: Tim, can you tell our viewers, is it realistic to expect a change in the emotion of the community? What have you seen in those other areas that you've been in for a while?

Timothy: Absolutely. In other cities like Carson where this has been implemented very successfully we've had a lot of positive feedback from the community where community members are saying, "I'm so glad to see that the graffiti has decreased." We actually had one letter that was written to the Mayor of the City of Carson where the individual said it was the least amount of graffiti he had seen 21 years of living in Carson. You definitely have a positive impact and you could expect that kind of results and make people feel more safe and feel better about their community which is ultimately what we all want.

Lee: It looks like the check is here. We're just about out of time. I want to thank you Joeann, who's the Vice President of the Harbor City Neighborhood Council and of course the executive director of that area's chamber and we want to thank you very much Tim for the fine work that you do. If you'd like to see different issues covered in future shows, you can just e-mail your comments to the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, [www.lacityneighborhoods.com](http://www.lacityneighborhoods.com). That's [www.lacityneighborhoods.com](http://www.lacityneighborhoods.com) or call 866-LAHELPS, toll-free. If you have any questions about any City services including graffiti removal call 3-1-1. It's your one stop call to City Hall and they'll connect you with anybody you need to get to in City Hall. For everyone here at the Neighborhood Café, I'm Lee Alpert.