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SAFETY | HEMPSTEAD

Street Known for Drug Crime Is Getting Clean

By [BRUCE LAMBERT](#)

HEMPSTEAD

THINGS got so bad on Terrace Avenue that residents sometimes called it Terror Avenue. They were not kidding.

Despite sporadic crackdowns, the strip persisted for decades as “home to the biggest, most notorious open-air drug market on Long Island,” said the Nassau County district attorney, Kathleen M. Rice.

The drug dealing was a magnet for gangs, illegal weapons, prostitution, robberies, assaults, stabbings and shootings, the authorities said.

After one murder, Mayor Wayne J. Hall Sr. said that a mother pleaded, “ ‘Mayor, you got to do something about this. I can’t even sleep at night. I’m afraid I’ll get shot.’ ” She told him that her two sons slept in the bathtub.

The police chief, Joseph B. Wing — whose parents lived on Terrace in the 1940s before its decline — said, “We had six homicides on or near the corner of Terrace and Bedell” Street in just one year.

“Terrace Avenue had hundreds of arrests — thousands,” he said. “We were always running after people with drugs, chasing them down hallways and stairwells, into alleyways, behind buildings, in the bushes. There was a lot of cat and mouse.”

Today, Terror Avenue is only a memory, albeit still a painfully recent one. After a year of relentless enforcement and community organizing, residents now stroll the sidewalks, no longer scuttling along nervously and casting fearful glances.

“Used to be nothing but young drug dealers out here, but now it’s a place where little kids go outside,” said Irving Gilreath, 42, a chef who was pushing his 6-week-old son in a stroller last week.

Another neighbor, Joseph Jackson, 26, recalled: “It was rough, a lot of gun violence, a lot of drugs, people laying round” in a stupor. “Now it’s all right.”

Drug arrests in the neighborhood dropped 87 percent in 2008, to 16 from 124 in 2007, officials announced last week, observing the first anniversary of the stepped-up enforcement effort.

Thousands of motorists pass near Terrace Avenue every day, most of them probably oblivious to its history. Only three blocks long, Terrace starts at the Fulton Avenue section of Hempstead Turnpike and runs parallel to Franklin Avenue, a block from the automobile row of car dealerships and near the [Long Island Rail Road](#) train station and Long Island Bus terminal.

The turnaround of Terrace is essential to Hempstead's revitalization, Mayor Hall said. A reputation for crime discourages business traffic, which hampers development that could relieve the high taxes for the schools.

"If people think this is a drug place, they won't want to come here," Mr. Hall said. "It's a slow process, but our reputation will change. Hempstead is coming back."

The transformation on Terrace started two years ago when prosecutors and the police secretly began a long-range counteroffensive. Months of undercover investigation focused on dozens of drug dealers, as concealed cameras recorded numerous drug transactions.

Then last January, officials struck back publicly with a multipronged plan. First, they arrested what they said were 38 major dealers. "Literally overnight the drug population was removed," District Attorney Rice said.

But 13 other suspects with no prior arrests were offered a second chance, a novel program inspired by a professor at [John Jay College of Criminal Justice](#), David M. Kennedy. Those suspects were invited to an emotional public meeting at the nearby African American Museum of Nassau County, along with residents and civic leaders. They were shown the videotaped evidence.

"The message was: you go straight, or you go to jail," Ms. Rice said.

The 13 suspects received support like drug counseling and job training and attended weekly meetings held by the nonprofit Council for Unity. Three have been rearrested — two on minor drug charges, one for shoplifting — and were prosecuted on the original charges.

"We said, 'We expect you to go straight, but we're going to help you,' " Ms. Rice said. The prospect of a law-abiding life drew other applicants.

Many residents were skeptical, believing that the enforcement was just another of the crackdowns that had come and gone.

But this time the police imposed round-the-clock patrols, installed surveillance cameras, set up roadblocks, inspected cars and checked pedestrians for identification.

"The Terrace-Bedell area was saturated with police to send the message there would be zero tolerance of crime," Ms. Rice said.

To halt the nightly parade of drug customers, the police photographed license plates and mailed warning letters to the owners. Some investigators posed as prostitutes and clients to make arrests.

Further disrupting the drug trade, police officers posing as dealers ground up macadamia nuts to be sold as cocaine.

Residents were not only the beneficiaries of the crackdown. They also played a central role, meeting monthly with law enforcement officials at the [Salvation Army](#) building at the north end of Terrace Avenue.

“The majority of people are law abiding and had been suffering in silence,” Chief Wing said. “Before, they were scared.”

Ms. Rice said: “We’ve given people the ability to take their neighborhood back. Kids should be able to go around the corner to the park without meeting a bullet or drug dealer.”

Wary of each other in the past, the police and residents are now allied. At a block party last summer, officers served 1,000 hot dogs and 1,000 hamburgers.

The enforcement drew criticism from some lawyers and civil libertarians. Some residents resented being stopped by the police, “but the majority were vocal in their support,” Chief Wing said.

Coincidentally, change was also under way at the street’s largest single building, the 417 federally subsidized apartments at 100 Terrace Avenue. Opened as an upscale project in 1972, it had fallen into neglect.

A company headed by Peter G. Florey took over in 2006, renovated kitchens and bathrooms and installed 220 security cameras. The cameras helped cut crime and solve a double homicide. The tenants’ association, headed by Inez Dingle, helped lead the fight.

Terrace Avenue has quieted enough for the police to pull back some patrols. But the stigma lingers. Luz Saintfort, 41, said she had hesitated about moving here last year. Since then, however, she said, “It’s been quiet.”

Things have changed so much that Chief Wing said there was serious talk of renaming the street.

“That’s very real,” Mr. Florey said. “I think that’s going to happen. It might be a fun process to get the children involved picking the name. Everybody would like to see the Terror/Terrace days behind us.”

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