

Dear John Letters

Battling prostitution by writing to wives of men arrested

By Ellen Yan

STAFF WRITER

Gordon Heights residents have been addressing form letters to the wives and mothers of men arrested on suspicion of soliciting prostitutes, hoping embarrassment, hurt and family pressure will dry up the flow of customers for prostitutes walking their streets.

"If you come into our community and you disturb our lives, then we will disturb your life," warned Carl Owens, acting president of the Gordon Heights Community Watch, which has sent out nine letters.

Two men who were arrested and whose families received letter have called to complain, each claiming they

are innocent, and a few families outraged by the campaign have described it as a hateful idea that won't work.

A furious Middle Island resident arrested in a May 13 sting demanded, "Who are they to do that?"

Saying he had solicited no one, the Middle Island man wishes the Watch group would remember "innocent until proven guilty" and shoot off letters only to those convicted of the crime. "Having a letter handed to you is like being told somebody in the family died," he said. "It's very traumatic, no matter if you're innocent or not."

But in the face of increasingly visible prostitution and drug sales in the area,

Watch members have begun getting names of those arrested from the police blotter and are contacting the suspects' wives and mothers.

"We are writing you asking you to keep him/her out of our community," stated the letters from the Gordon Heights Community Watch. Then in capital letters at the end, "GORDON HEIGHTS IS NOT A PLAYGROUND BUT THE LOCUS OF PEOPLE'S HOMES."

Police and Watch members say outsiders invade the neighborhood, disrupting residents' chances to lead normal lives. They say not only prostitutes are solicited. Children walking to and from school also are propositioned as

are women who live in the neighborhood, they say. Police said arrests for solicitation in Gordon Heights have "increased dramatically" in the last five years.

"I'm not about hurting anybody," said Elsie Owens, founder of the local Community Watch. "But by the same token, I don't feel good about these men coming in here soliciting women, my grandchildren or any young people. Our kids can't go any place and they're angry."

Mailed last month, the first batch of letters went to men ages 20 to 49, from Farmingdale to Middle Island, all

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caught during the May 13 sting. The next set of letters is being prepared.

The mother of a 24-year-old arrested for soliciting called the mailing a "waste of time." "He's 24 years old and I'm not responsible for his actions," said the woman, who declined to be quoted by name.

Lt. Harold Jantzen of the Sixth Precinct's crime section, which covers Gordon Heights, said some good may come out of the letters but that he feels bad for those who made a mistake in a spur-of-the-moment decision that under normal circumstances might not come to light. "In many crimes you don't have to pay with embarrassment, loss of your relationship, loss of your family."

So far, the two men who called the Owens family have put in their orders: Don't bug their wives or ruin their lives.