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## Gangs, surf culture intertwine in Santa Cruz, and the result can be violent

By Jennifer Squires

Posted: 05/02/10, 12:01 AM PDT | Updated: on 04/14/2015

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SANTA CRUZ -- The outward difference between Westsiders with local pride and Westside Norteno gang members is subtle -- so much so that police often can't tell the difference without talking with the people.

It's not just a problem for police. Mistaken identity can turn into a deadly confrontation.

The images both groups project -- red shirts and territorial claims, joking or not, to the Westside of town -- are so similar, gang members looking for a fight may never know if the person they attacked is a gang rival or just a Steamer Lane surf rat.

Two gang attacks in six months have claimed Westside teenagers who friends and family have said were not gang members. But police say bona fide gang members may have perceived the young men -- Tyler Tenorio, 16, and Carl Reimer, 19 -- to be enemies because of factors like clothing, actions or where they were hanging out.

"You could have a surfer or whatever look like anybody, be mistaken for anybody. You get individuals on the periphery caught up in the violence," said Otilio "O.T." Quintero, the assistant director of Santa Cruz Barrios Unidos, a gang intervention and prevention program.

Police were quick to point out that they are, in no way, blaming either homicide victim for the violence.

"Culture has changed," said Santa Cruz Police Deputy Chief Rick Martinez, a Harbor High graduate. "There was a day when Eastside-Westside was a surf rivalry in our town. Now if you're claiming Westside' or Eastside,' depending on the context, you could be representing a gang."

The east-west localism in Santa Cruz grew out of the community's surfing tradition. As riding waves grew in popularity, kids stuck to the breaks in their neighborhoods and tried to keep outsiders from their favorite spots.

"Surfers tend to be a little territorial," said John Mel, 63, who owns Freeline surf shop in Pleasure Point on the Eastside. "But it's tongue in cheek."

Longtime Santa Cruz surfers say the rivalry was good-natured and rarely got more heated than punches thrown after a surf session.

"There wasn't anything really serious between the surfers," said Richard Schmidt, who runs a surf school at Cowell Beach, a Westside surf spot. "It's all one community."

Most importantly, surfers said they still had respect for one another.

"It was just fun and games," said Darryl "Flea" Virostko, a big wave surfer from the Westside. "We were all friends and we pushed each other on a day-to-day basis. ... That's how people got better."

Virostko and longtime friends are featured in an upcoming documentary called "The Westsiders," which explores the Westside surfing gang that dominated Steamer Lane and got involved with drugs. Directed by Santa Cruzan Joshua Leonard "Pomegranate" Pomer, the film will premiere in Santa Cruz on May 8 during the Santa Cruz Film Festival.

Times have changed

Sureno gangs, which claim the color blue and No. 13, formed at Santa Cruz High and in the Beach Flats neighborhood as early as the 1970s, when the children of Mexican immigrants banded together to defend themselves against the taunting of local kids, according to police. In time, some of those local kids created Norteno gangs.

Martinez and Santa Cruz police Lt. Bernie Escalante -- a Santa Cruz High alumnus -- said back then being in a gang wasn't as attractive as it is today.

Some blame media and the entertainment industry for glamorizing the "thug" lifestyle or technology and social networking for spreading trends so quickly.


The shift has been gradual, but police said gang activity has been increasing in the city for years.


More than a decade ago, Santa Cruz High changed its school color from red to burgundy, a color associated with Norteno street gangs -- to burgundy.

Despite that, local Norteno and Sureno gang subsets have adopted aspects of area surf culture that show territorial allegiance.

"It's unfortunate, but it's now intertwined with this existing culture in our city," Martinez said.

For instance, police say:

 The red "WS" stickers that stand for the Westside neighborhood can also represent one of the city's gangs.

 Responding to a shout of "Westside" with "Eastside" or vice versa can be interpreted by gang members as a challenge to fight.

 Crossing two middle fingers to make a "W" may be a joking gesture to represent living on the Westside, or a territorial gang claim.

"They think they're just defending the side of town they were born and raised in, but that's perceived totally differently by a rival gang member. That's perceived as a challenge," Escalante said.

Tenorio and friends were driving past suspected gang members standing at the corner of Chestnut and Laurel streets on Oct. 16. The suspected gang members yelled at the passing car and one of the teens in the car yelled "Westside" back, according to police. The teens pulled over and ran to the corner, presumably to fight, but more gang members joined in and the teens tried to flee. Tenorio tripped and was attacked. He was stabbed 16 times and died on the street.

Police have released fewer details about the circumstances surrounding Reimer's death, but the teen's friends said suspected gang members pulled into the park area of the Mission Gardens apartment complex at 90 Grandview St. and shouted gang slurs less than an hour before the deadly shooting. The teens, who were hanging out in the grass, yelled for the suspected gang members to leave. Just before midnight, someone opened fire at Reimer and a 15-year-old boy as they walked home through the park. Reimer was hit three times and died the Regional Medical Center in San Jose.

"These kids need to be smart right now," Virostko said. "They need to just realize that two of their close friend have died. It's no joke."

He said kids, regardless of where they live, need to realize that colors and neighborhood claims are not worth endangering their lives.

"Westside. Eastside. It all boils down to We're from Santa Cruz," Virostko said. "That's what needs to be realized here. This whole gang thing is getting so out-of-control, it's putting everyone in jeopardy."

Scared and seeking solutions

Grieving and frightened after losing two Westside teens to suspected gang violence since October, many community members don't know where to turn.

"Anything to do with the gang thing in Santa Cruz just depresses me," said surfer Josh Mulcoy, whose dad was one of the first to surf the sandbar at the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor. "We're not that type of town. We're a sleepy ocean community. Now all these gang people are getting involved and people are dying. It's super sad."

At some surf shops that sell red "Westside" gear, employees said keeping the merchandise on the shelves made them fearful that unsuspecting customers would buy it and -- without realizing the danger -- be targeted for wearing gang colors.

Santa Cruz High School Principal Karen Edmonds declined to talk about the climate on her campus this week. Both victims had attended the school.

"We're having a very difficult time right now," she said.

But high school students are angry, according to Eileen Brown, director of student services for Santa Cruz City Schools. They're seeking positive outlets for their frustration and pain, like floating an idea to mentor younger students.

"They're saying, We're all just students. We all just live here together and we want to get along," Brown said. "I think before this, it was a non-issue for kids."

But there also is an undercurrent of racism and anti-immigration sentiment when discussing gang problems. Several speakers at last Tuesday's City Council meeting, where dozens of residents packed the chamber, said they believed illegal immigrants were responsible for the violence and that Santa Cruz's "sanctuary city" status was preventing police from combating gang violence.

Norteno and Sureno gangs are tied to Latino prison gangs and members are predominantly of Mexican descent. However, Santa Cruz police officers said there are white and black kids involved in local gangs.

"This is not just first-generation Mexicans versus second-generation Mexicans," said Martinez, the Santa Cruz police deputy chief.

Quintero of Santa Cruz Barrios Unidos said pointing the finger at one group of people will not help the community find solutions to the gang issue.

"When we look at violence, it just doesn't affect one race, one culture, one nationality," Quintero said. "It affects everyone. When we start to put colors, shades, nationalities on it, then we start to say violence is only happening in these parts of society, but as you can see, we've got two races involved here."

"If we don't respond from both ends, we're never really going to be able to reduce or impact violence," Quintero said.

Some believe the solution is law and order.

"The answer is, if they're stupid enough to say 'Westside' that puts them in gang-mode," said Chuck Peddle, whose teenage grandson was a friend of Reimer. "I think anybody who does that deserves to spend a little time in the police station."

Others, including police, suggest education.

For example, adults need to talk to teens about why they're wearing red or doodling "WSC" on their school binders. Kids also need to be told possible consequences of the decisions their making, according to police.

"That's something we really want the parents to convey to their children -- it's not longer a fistfight in the water. The conflicts now are more violent," Martinez said. "Until parents really start looking at what their kids are acting like, we're going to continue to see these shootings and stabbings."

Church leaders on the Westside are trying to provide support for young people by hosting a free concert featuring a Christian indie pop-rock band.

The Circle Church, Victory Outreach Church and Santa Cruz Revival are co-sponsoring the event Tuesday night. Steve DeFields-Gambrel, pastor of The Circle Church, called the Westside "embattled" and said kids are "terrified, traumatized and in shock."

Schmidt, the surf school instructor, recommended kids just surf.

"Be a surfer. Be true to your roots," he said. "Also, just walk the other way. Let your ego slide."

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Free concert for Westside Youth

WHAT: Everfound, a Christian indie rock band

WHEN: 7 p.m. Tuesday

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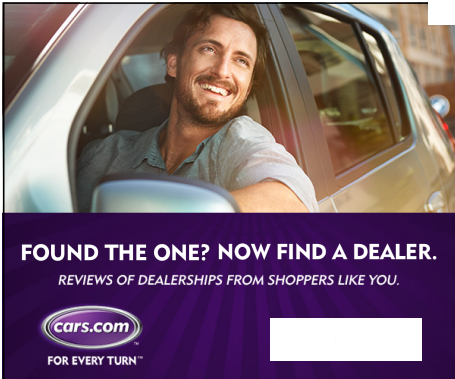
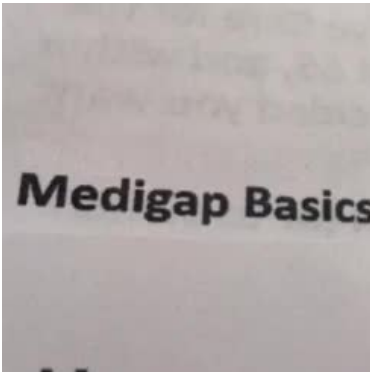
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