

# Protecting the neighborhood

By Jennifer Einberg

For 35 years, Bertha and Robert Wooldridge have worked or lived in the Westlake area, but as the years passed, the area changed drastically.

It went from one where you could walk around safely at night to a neighborhood where families were afraid to go outside even during the day, according to Bertha Wooldridge.

In 11 years, from 1981 to 1992, the Wooldridges' store, Westlake Plumbing and Hardware, suffered through 17 break-ins. And then in 1992, four gang members entered the store with guns, closed the door behind them and ordered everyone to lie down on the floor. Holding a gun to her head while she kneeled on the ground, the gang members demanded money, Wooldridge says.

Her husband was in the back room when the gang members entered and called the police as soon as he saw what was happening. The police arrived in time to arrest the thieves, and even though no one was hurt, the couple decided that it was time to make a change.

After the robbery, Robert Wooldridge was ready to leave the area and close down the store, Bertha Wooldridge says.

"He didn't want to keep it open anymore," she says. "He didn't want to come back and find me dead."

But Wooldridge says she was determined to fight back. In March 1992, the couple started the Westlake Protectors, a Neighborhood Watch group that drastically changed the area, she says.

"The reason we started it was because of the gangs, drugs, homeless, all the crimes together," she says. "Everyone was edgy and scared because the crime was increasing in the area."

Westlake Protectors covers a neighborhood filled with apartment buildings and businesses that stretches from Alvarado Street to Union Avenue and 7th to 11th streets.

"They've reduced the crime in the area," says David Marquez, chief field deputy for 1st District City Councilman Mike Hernandez' office who used to attend Westlake Protectors meetings. "They've been able to improve the quality of life in the area."

Marquez attributes the group's success partly to Bertha Wooldridge, whom he says gets the job done in a quiet and consistent way. He adds that the Wooldridges' store has become a place where people in the neighborhood can come with questions and concerns.

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# Wooldridge

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More than four years after its start, the Westlake Protectors now meets monthly and boasts 50 steady members, comprising business owners and residents.

The meetings, which are attended by police officer Teresa Valez from the Los Angeles Police Department's Rampart Division and a representative from Hernandez's office, provide a place for people to air their concerns and get results.

At last week's meeting, someone complained about drug dealing on a corner of 11th Street, a problem the police reacted to immediately, Wooldridge says. Problems tend to be about drugs and gangs in apartment buildings or prostitution in the area, Wooldridge says.

The group meets in a community room behind the Wooldridges'



hardware store. The room is decorated with pictures from past events, including days when residents came together to clean the streets. There are also awards and T-shirts from past events hanging on the walls.

The group's next project is getting a park at the corner of 9th and Bonnie Brae streets. They plan to call it "Hope and Peace Park."

"We need a park around here. The children need a park," Wooldridge says.

The park would be one more improvement in the area that has already improved so much.

According to Wooldridge, while four years ago you couldn't even walk a block without being in danger, now families feel safe in the neighborhood. In addition, ever since the start of Westlake Protectors, her store has been free of robberies.

"It's made me happy, you can walk now," she says.

**Editor's Note:** This is the third in a series of series on the Los Angeles Independent Newspaper Group-Los Angeles Dodgers' 1996 Community All Stars.

