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## THE BADGE

### Valencia Gardens is safer, thanks to beat cops

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Monday, July 23, 2007

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Officer Kevin Stancombe rides his police-issue bike quietly through the courtyard of the Valencia Gardens housing project.

It's the middle of the afternoon, and he's all alone in the middle of what used to be one of the worst projects in the city. Not today. There's not a creature stirring. Not a blade of grass out of place. No music blaring from an open window, no drug deals going down around the corner, no "shots fired" radio calls.

"Man, a couple of years ago, this place was off the hook," Stancombe says, surveying the neat and clean parking lot. "It was like, the house is burning. We'd get gun calls here all the time."

Not long ago, Stancombe said, he and his partner, Nate Steger, were at the Gardens giving out stuffed animals to kids.

"I was thinking how, just in that very spot, Nate and I used to run through with loaded shotguns," Stancombe says.

Valencia Gardens has undergone a total renovation. The projects used to be cinder-block buildings that looked more like a prison than low-income housing. The design was simple but crude and the buildings had all sorts of stairway landings and nooks and crannies where drugs were sold and used. Fighting and shooting and general mayhem were common. Many a drug dealer expelled his final breath in or near Valencia Gardens back in the day.

Capt. John Goldberg, commander of the SFPD's Mission Station, referred to the old projects as a "bucket of blood."

The buildings, constructed in 1943, were demolished and replaced with modern but severe-looking townhouses. The project reopened in 2006, and now includes homes for the elderly and market-rate housing to mix with the units for low-income residents.

Stancombe is a beat cop who works the area around 16th and Mission streets; Valencia Gardens is just two



blocks from there.

His biggest concern when the projects reopened was that they would quickly return to the state they were in before. And that was a real possibility.

When the old projects came down, the residents -- including the drug dealers, convicts and petty criminals -- were scattered to other projects in the city, or they went to live with friends or family elsewhere.

When Valencia Gardens reopened, the old crew slowly started coming back around, trying to insinuate themselves on their old turf. Some cops who work the area said it was like having commuter gang members.

"Once you have your turf, it's your turf," says one undercover officer who asked not to be named. "If you go to another project, that's someone else's turf, and you are not invited in. So you take the bus or BART back to your own turf."

But the bad guys were not invited back to the Gardens. So they took to hanging out -- called "posting up" - in the adjacent blocks.

Stancombe and Steger, and other beat cops, made it a habit to spend time around Valencia Gardens. To check in with the on-site managers a couple of times per shift. To keep an eye out for the troublemakers.

"We'd come over and find one of the old gang hanging out, trying to get inside," Stancombe says. "So we'd ask, 'Who are you here for?' 'My cousin.' 'Who's your cousin? What's his name? Let's go see if he's home and if he wants to see you.' If they didn't know the number, or if there wasn't anyone home, we'd take them right out of there. Every time."

Justine Minnis, a regional manager for John Stewart Co., which runs Valencia Gardens, says the first couple of months after the projects reopened were critical.

"We had many residents who had lived there before who recognized some of the people affiliated with gangs, and they identified them for the police," she says. "Some of them had outstanding warrants. Once they were identified, they never came back."

On a recent weekday, Stancombe and Steger and a couple of other cops stop by to visit one of the managers, who will remain anonymous because she is not authorized to speak to reporters. The manager hugs the cops and teases Stancombe, who she says is one of her favorite people.

"This guy spends so much time here, he ought to live here," she says.

Everything is fine today, the woman says. No problems, no trouble.

But it's always just around the corner.

A day or two earlier, she'd seen some "little gang-bangers" hanging around the corner and chased them off. "Why didn't you call me?" Stancombe asks.

"Oh, I don't need help with those little boys," she says dismissively.

Reporter John Koopman and photographer Brant Ward are embedding with the San Francisco Police Department. Their stories appear weekly in the Monday paper. To see more

stories and photos and the Badge blog, go to [sfgate.com/thebadge](http://sfgate.com/thebadge).

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This article appeared on page **D - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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