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Koban, 'place of peace,' grows strong at Gonzales Gardens

Program puts police in community's heart

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About 2:30 p.m., a parade of children scamper up the hill from Lyon Street Elementary to Gonzales Gardens, the public housing community off Forest Drive where they live.

Jerome Cardwell and Columbia Police Officer Donald Yacobucci wait at the top of the hill. Program director Cardwell, Yacobucci and another police officer, Albertus Cocklin, are the people behind the Gonzales Gardens koban, a Japanese word for mini-station.

The koban, one of the 278 small apartments at Gonzales Gardens, is a base for community policing and youth programs. The idea is not to react to crime but to prevent it by dealing with the causes.

Columbia is one of 11 cities in the United Cities with a koban program. The kobans are funded by the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, a private organization based in Washington.

The Gonzales Gardens koban, Columbia's first, opened in late 1995. Since then, the total number of crimes reported in the Gonzales Gardens area is down 13 percent, according to police statistics.

But, says Columbia Chief Charles Austin, chairman of the Eisenhower Foundation's koban committee, "Koban is more than a crime tool."

Instead, the koban is designed to enhance quality of life in the community, he says.

"You call this a koban. I call it my refuge, my security and my place of peace." Chanda Scott, a teen-ager in the community, said at the ribbon-cutting ceremony.

A second koban at Hendley Homes opened in November. Future kobans are planned for Lady Street and Saxon Homes.

Before Cardwell and the two officers arrived at Gonzales Gardens, some of the kids never made it to school. No one made them go or told them why they should. So they hung out. Some were lured by the excitement of the streets, where they were confronted with drugs and other illegal activities.

Police say there's a direct link between truancy and crime.

"Hey baby," Cardwell calls out to the children. He does about 150 "Hey babies" a day.

One girl's notebooks fall out of her unzipped backpack. Yacobucci helps her pick up the scattered papers. Other children run to Cardwell's side for hugs and warmth.

"Can we do our homework in the koban?" they ask. Cardwell tells them to check in at home first. He didn't do that when the koban opened because he worried about what awaited them there. Cardwell wanted the children to be in a place where he knew they were safe. That's what Cardwell and the officers provide at the koban.

"One hour here is one hour they're not with the local drug dealer," Cardwell says.

It didn't take long for the koban to catch on with the young residents of Gonzales Gardens. "It keeps you out of trouble," says 15-year-old Paul Inman. "I wasn't into it, but I seen everyone coming down here and I wanted to see what was going on."

Study hall. The children don't have far to walk to reach the safety of the koban. It's right around the corner from the elementary school and near the bus stop for the older students. The koban is decorated much like a classroom, with bulletin boards full of pictures.

"Where's your homework?" Cardwell asks the children as they enter the sanctuary.

Eight-year-old Rodderick Hopkins doesn't have a pencil to do his social-studies assignment. Cardwell asks how he's going to do his work. The boy does what Cardwell calls the "Gonzales Gardens." He shrugs his shoulders and mumbles, "I don't know."

The shoulder-shrug, typical of young children, is forbidden around the koban.

Cardwell tells Rodderick that trying to do your homework without pencil is like going to a football game wearing basketball shoes. The child leaves and returns shortly with a pencil.

After answering two chapter-review questions, Rodderick announces he's finished. This elicits another stern look. "We'll say when you're finished," Cardwell says. "We don't just do enough to get by."

Rodderick says he likes the koban because he can get help with his homework. He and the other children are eager to finish their homework so they can play education games on the six computers there.

Cardwell says the tutoring has improved the children's grades. He requires each child to bring their tests and report cards to the koban. When the program started, Cardwell says, the children told him, "My mama has mine" or "the teacher didn't give me mine." When that happens, Cardwell says, "You know somebody has bad grades."

Now the children rush to him, fighting over who will be first to show their report cards.

The small things. Keith Terry, a seventh-grader at Crayton Middle School, was one of the kids who tried to hide his grades. "I used to get in trouble all the time," he says.

Keith's grades have improved and he hasn't been punished for minor disciplinary infractions in three months. The 12-year old takes a break from playing a math game on one of the koban's computers. He says he's been staying out of trouble because he's "getting to be a teen-ager."

Keith's mother, Pearly Johnson, says the koban is Keith's second home: "That's all he talks about."

Keith has mastered the computer games. "Everybody asks me to help them. This is going to be my koban when Mr. Cardwell leaves."

Small, seemingly insignificant things - like baseball uniforms - make a difference to the children. Players on the koban basketball team looked like a pick-up group until Baptist Medical Center gave them uniforms last year. Then they stood a little taller.

Antwan Hopkins, Rodderick's 18-year-old brother, wants to start practicing for the upcoming season right away. He asked Cardwell when practice is scheduled to begin. That depends on when someone takes the leadership role to get the team reorganized, Cardwell replies.

Police statistics show a 75 percent decrease in reported drug violations in the Gonzales Gardens area since 1995, when the koban opened.

The uniforms provide an incentive. Cardwell threatens to give the jerseys to the Hendley Homes koban if the Gonzales Gardens team doesn't get it together. "It's no magic formula," Cardwell says. "It's that somebody cares."

The 'right things,' Peggy Daniel, who lives across the street from Gonzales Gardens, says her 16-year-old granddaughter, Monique Johnson, has made a complete turnaround since she's been involved with the koban.

Johnson is the only youth on the koban's board of directors. But you won't find her at the koban very often. She has a job at the Bojangles near Gonzales Gardens.

Last summer, all the kids in the program were placed in jobs. Cardwell taught them how to fill out job applications, what to wear for an interview and what employers expect.

Tonia Corley, a mother of three, says the kids once didn't care about anything. "Now they're women and men," she says.

Corley says some parents are hesitant to get involved because they don't want the police to find out what's going on at home.

But Cardwell says the kids now are asking their parents to become involved in their schools and the koban. "They're nagging their parents for the right things," says Cardwell. "Now, how about that?"

Making 'friends.' Nightfall is pretty quiet at Gonzales Gardens. On warm evenings, residents gather outside their apartment to talk and keep an eye on the children.

It wasn't this quiet before the koban. Residents were scared to go outside at night. Wilhelmina Wright, a resident and mother of four, says she would only peek out the door and then close it quickly.

Police often chased drug dealers through Gonzales Gardens. The dealers would throw their stash anywhere to get rid of the evidence. Corley says residents couldn't sit outside on their steps because drugs would land in their laps.

"When I first came here, we got calls like this," Officer Cocklin says, snapping his fingers rapidly. Now, he says, he can go a whole night without one call.

Police statistics show a 75 percent decrease in reported drug violations in the Gonzales Gardens area since 1995, when the koban opened. "We can't say we're drug-free, but we're close," says resident Jeannie White.

When Cocklin started at the koban, he spent two hours each night walking the grounds. Cocklin says he liked to lean on his police car in front of the park where drug dealers hung out.

He got to know their names and faces. He'd greet them by name when they talked by. "You treat them just like your best friend," he says. People don't want to do business with a dealer who's in with the police, Cocklin says. "You kinds ruin their business. Now the kids have their park back."

At one time, gunshots kept Gonzales Gardens residents awake at night, Cocklin says, "Now, residents call up when they see something suspicious," he says.

Even toy guns are forbidden at the koban. And Cocklin enforces a 9 p.m. curfew for the children.

Counting souls. Major crimes reported in the Gonzales Gardens area - such as homicides, rapes, armed robberies, aggravated assaults, burglaries and larcenies - are down 27 percent from 1995, according to police statistics.

Other reported crimes - such as domestic violence, destruction of property and disorderly conduct - have shown a more modest 2 percent decline. Cocklin and Yacobucci says most of the calls they receive are for domestic disturbances.

The youths are staying out of trouble. From December 1995 to February 1997, there were 600 reported incidents of juvenile crime in Columbia. Of those, three occurred in the Gonzales Gardens area, Cardwell says.

Cocklin and Yacobucci say they've succeeded if the crime rate drops. Cardwell, on the other hand, counts souls.

He likes to tell a story about a teen who stopped him on his way to his car one evening. "We were going through a lot of growing pains," Cardwell says. "I guess he saw it on my face."

The teen said, "Don't leave."

"Man, I got to go home," said Cardwell.

"No, I don't mean that," said the teen-ager. "Whatever you do, don't leave us. People always leave us."

The teen was Antwan Hopkins. He's one of the souls Cardwell can count. Hopkins says his grades have improved, he's staying out of trouble and he's thinking about going to collage.

Says Hopkins, "Sometimes you don't know how to get a certain place, so you give up. They show you how to get back on track."