When neighbourhood?s watch

by SHERALYN ROMAN

You've seen the signs, posted near the entrance of a community ? a watchful eye (or groups of eyes and/or people) with an inclusive, ?warm and friendly? sounding message stating you are now entering ?A Neighbourhood Watch Community.? It's supposed to make you feel secure. Like ?back in the day? when neighbours watched out for one another because it was the right thing to do. Don't get me wrong, it still is. But what happens when neighborhoods watch too much? What happens when they share on social media too much? Sometimes, when neighborhoods watch ? suspicion, rumour and a disproportionate amount of blame on a particular group or demographic are wrongly placed on the altar of ?truth.?

Neighbourhood Watch came about originally, in the US, largely as the result of a horrific crime that took place while upwards of 12 witnesses were nearby and did nothing to stop it or call police. Its purpose is meant to engage ?an organized group of civilians devoted to crime and vandalism prevention within a neighbourhood. The aim of neighbourhood watch includes educating residents of a community on security and safety and achieving safe and secure neighbourhoods.? Police actively discourage folks from interfering or attempting to stop a crime in progress but instead encourage us to keep an eye out and report concerns immediately. In a front page article, back in 2008, I wrote about the topic of petty crime and vandalism in one particular Caledon community where residents had expressed this was an ongoing concern but police had only responded to seven incidents. That's because seven was all that was ever reported to them. At that time, police advised residents to adopt a ?call and we will come? approach, telling residents that they can only respond appropriately if they are informed about concerns. Neighbourhood Watch in that sense can assist police with doing their job and that's a good thing.

My issue today, with the exponential rise in the use of and reliance upon on social media (a lot sure has changed since that story was first published) as a tool for sharing information, is that police are once again sometimes being left out of the equation and a form of vigilantism is taking their place. What I see on various community group pages are postings that seem to disproportionately target specific ethnic, race or cultural groups when it comes to complaints about behaviours. Recent examples included the posting of a vehicle make, model and license plate number with a description of the lone male occupant as a ?person of colour? except that's not the wording the poster used. Not only did it refer to him in a specific manner but having now seen several of these types of posts in a variety of community groups, but not once having seen a post about a suspicious Caucasian, I can't help but be concerned about what this means in terms of racial profiling. Of even more concern, the number of people that commented within minutes ? many making outrageously negative comments about both the ?suspicious? person and the person who posted - was ridiculous. On another group, actual pictures of young adults, clearly under the age of 16, taken by a doorbell camera were posted with inflammatory language and suggestions about what these kids were ?up to?? Turns out ? for the record ? they were delivering flyers. In still another example, a picture ? with the licence plate clearly showing ? of a vehicle parked ?suspiciously? in front of someone's home was shared widely on a community group page before someone else questioned the moral and ethical privacy violations of doing so. Meanwhile, as I sat working in my home office one day, just a few doors down from my home a house was broken into and no one saw or heard a thing ? myself included I'm ashamed to say. Perhaps everyone was too busy taking pictures and posting them on facebook chat groups to notice that a real crime was taking place?

Neighbourhood Watch works and works well in communities where folks do what they are supposed to do ? call police if they see what they believe to be suspicious activity. Quite a few years ago our family had a troubling experience with a white van trolling our neighbourhood. We didn't take a picture because frankly, we didn't pause long enough to do so. What we did do was immediately call the OPP. It's their job to determine what's suspicious and what is not. It's their job to put out a public safety notification if in fact the white van was problematic (it was) and not just some poor individual that was in the neighbourhood making a service repair call. Neighbourhood Watch facebook groups can (and should) share that kind of public safety notice. It's a great way to spread informed news to the community. What they shouldn't be sharing is personal information, plate numbers, pictures of anyone (especially minors) and inflammatory or suggestive language that encourages inflammatory responses. That serves no purpose at all and merely confuses suspicion with truth.