In Freetown, safety comes in neighbors

Of all the plans Claire Lowry and Melodi Marchiafava had for their first week of settling into their new residence in Freetown, placing their homemade yard signs warning potential thieves that they're being watched around the neighborhood wasn't one of them.

Then again, having their Jackson Street home broken into wasn't one of them, either.

"It certainly made us very cautious," Marchiafava said, sitting inside their house they had rented out for eight years before moving in early July. "It made us very aware of where we are."

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A neighborhood watch sign is pictured on Clinton Street in Lafayette's Freetown neighborhood. LESLIE WESTBROOK, THE ADVERTISER

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Where they are is one of Lafayette's oldest neighborhoods, a colorful community with a rich past that isn't well-known south of the Saint Streets. Marchiafava, though, wasn't talking about its history.

While undergoing renovations, their house has been almost totally bare, creating a space so empty that the couple of 19 years nearly didn't notice that some power tools and a portable TV had been stolen. Lowry estimated the suspects got away with about $1,000 worth of goods—including the TV they'd heard talk of Freetown's bad crime reputation before they moved, of course, but they said they now know it isn't just a rumor.

“We don't want to act like we feel so unsafe,” Lowry said. “But we also want to be realistic about what's around us.”

A friendly history

Freetown was built upon the principle of neighbors helping neighbors.

After the abolition of slavery, freed slaves moved there to learn from the free blacks who had lived there since before the Civil War, according to research done by University of Louisiana at Lafayette professors and the Center for Louisiana Studies. Around 1880, they established the True Friends Society. The neighborhood became defined by its diversity and acceptance, a poor reputation then but a celebrated legacy now. By the mid-1990s, Freetown was a thriving, blue-collar community, home to artisans, artists and scholars of all different races.

Neighborhood watch

Freetown does have an official neighborhood watch, but Lafayette Police Department spokeswoman Cpl. Nicole Benoit said it appears it has been inactive for quite some time. A few of the watch's signs remain hanging along Vermilion Street, but overgrown tree branches conceal two of them, and one is bent and twisted around a post, likely from time and weather.

If engaged, Benoit said, neighborhood watches can be "extremely successful." Participants who witness suspicious activity call the police, who then send officers "immediately to investigate," she said.

There are 30 official watches within the Lafayette city limits. "Without the cooperation of the neighborhood watch program, a crime may go unnoticed until the homeowner returns to the property," Benoit said.

Last week, having decided a more unified effort from the neighborhood would be more effective, Lowry and Marchiafava picked up their signs. They attended the Freetown coterie meeting, where a police officer put them in contact with people who have successfully established watches. But Lowry said being official isn't what makes neighborhoods safe.

"It's more about getting to know your neighbor, having their backs," she said. "We just have to agree to look out for one another."

By the numbers

Over the last 90 days, 109 crimes were reported in Freetown, an area of about 0.35 square miles and home to roughly 1,200 residents. Of those, according to data from the Lafayette Parish Sheriff's Office, 32 were thefts, 24 vehicle burglaries, 14 criminal damages to property, five residential burglaries, one assault and one homicide.

For perspective, compare those numbers to those of two nearby towns, both of which average 15 square miles in size and 8,250 in population. Of the 224 reported crimes in Broussard, 129 were traffic accidents, which is double the town's number of thefts and five times its number of vehicle burglaries. In Youngsville, 29 of the 79 reported crimes involved vehicular crashes; there were also 28 combined thefts and vehicle burglaries.

High crime, however, doesn't necessarily equal high fear.

EB Brooks lives a few blocks from Lowry and Marchiafava. She said Freetown has never made her feel unsafe.

"Crime's a threat no matter where you live," Brooks said. "If you have no fear in your heart, you'll have no fear in your life."

Moving forward

Lowry and Marchiafava aren't scared, they said. They're being safe. Besides, they've always wanted to settle down in Freetown, where Marchiafava lived in the 1970s for college and near where Lowry grew up. Its culture far outweighs its crime.

"More incidents will happen, probably, but with neighbors like ours here who just walk up to your porch and sit down, that's how we can stay safe," Marchiafava said. "We can stay safe if we become a family."