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## Crime Stoppers - Still keeping an eye on Gillespie County

After 23 years, local program still working to stop crime

By Danny Hirt – Fredericksburg Standard

It's been 23 years since the Gillespie County Crime Stoppers organization was formed. And in that time, the group has worked tirelessly to help solve crimes in Fredericksburg and the rest of the county.

The idea behind Crime Stoppers is a simple one — paying reward money to citizens who, while remaining nameless, provide information that leads to arrests and convictions of criminals.

"Anonymity is the hallmark of this program," said Gillespie County Sheriff's Office deputy Joe Folse who serves as coordinator and liaison officer for the local Crime Stoppers program. "It's the most critical thing."

According to former sheriff Milton Jung, local citizen Keith Keller came into his office one day to see what could be done to help stem the tide of a series of crimes in and around Fredericksburg.

Jung said he told Keller that he "was just the guy I need to visit with" regarding the starting of a Crime Stoppers program.

The sheriff said it was imperative that the crime-fighting effort have the support of a broad range of the community to be successful locally. "We put our heads together" to get a list of people who'd serve on the first GCCS board.

"He (Keller) was able to get enough interest" throughout the county to get the program started.

Keller said he was disturbed by the rash of break-ins that had occurred in the late 1980s, especially at Zeo Weinheimer's sporting goods store and at Robert Pape's barber shop.

"I got upset about it and visited with Jung," Keller said, adding that the sheriff was aware of Crime Stoppers but needed the help of concerned citizens.

One of the original board members, Marjorie Rees, said she, too, was upset about the crime surge. She mentioned that she approached Keller to see what could be done within the Gillespie County community to help solve these crimes.

She added that they both felt it would be "a good idea to get people who lived in different parts of the county" to get involved with whatever solution could be found.

"We got a group of us together and its just took off from there," Rees said of the local Crime Stoppers effort.

The first organizational meeting — held April 19, 1989 at Andy's Diner — was led by interim chairman Steve Watson, with Fredericksburg Police Department Sgt. Conrad Farnhof serving as co-coordinator and liaison officer.

Other board members at the time were: George Vogel, Gene Bode, Marjorie Rees, Keith Keller, Joyce Marshall, John Dooley and Alton Klier.

That meeting, according to Folsie who is now the program's coordinator and liaison officer, "set this whole thing in motion."

What started out as an eight-person board has expanded to 12 members. The current board of directors is composed of the following members:

Troy Ottmers, chairman; Tony Klein, vice president; Joanne Martin, secretary; Gesena Houy, treasurer; and remaining board members: Todd Willingham, Dick Stuewe, Calvin Otte, Annabel Wilkinson, David Fransik, Mary Krebs, Marcus Vidrine and Sarah Eckert.

Folsie fills the post of coordinator and liaison officer.

In response to that crime wave of the late 1980s in the area, Fredericksburg chief of police at the time, Bob Werner, asked Farnhof to help start up the Crime Stoppers program here.

The local effort had to start from the ground up, Farnhof said. "We had to get by-laws and (board) officers, and we had no money," he said.

He mentioned that with regard to funding, the local Kiwanis Club pledged \$500 to get things rolling for the fledging Crime Stoppers movement.

"Steve Watson and I went to Odessa to a Crime Stoppers meeting so we could learn something about it," Farnhof said.

In those early years of the program, there were "ingenious ways" that rewards would be paid to the informants, Farnhof said. He remembered one time when the person due payment asked to be met down a back road at a certain fence post and at a certain time of night.

But Farnhof said these steps were necessary to keep the name of the informant a secret. "I don't know of a single time that the identification got out," he said.

## History of Crime Stoppers

According to Folse, the original Crime Stoppers effort was started in Albuquerque, N.M., while police detective Greg MacAleese was investigating the July 1976 shooting death of college student Michael Carmen.

MacAleese was convinced that a key to solving this crime would be to get as much information as possible from the public. To that end, he convinced a local television station to run a re-enactment of the crime.

The episode was broadcast about four months after the murder, resulting in a call the next day from a witness who supplied information that was critical in solving the case.

After the success of this initial effort, MacAleese convinced his department to begin a regular effort to help solve crimes.

Folse relayed that MacAleese mentioned that most major crimes are not solved by police investigation, but, rather, as a direct result of information given by the public.

The Gillespie County Sheriff's deputy added that since 1976, the Crime Stoppers program has spread to virtually every state in the union, as well as the United Kingdom, parts of Asia and Latin America, even to areas of the African continent.

## Crime Stoppers program comes to Texas

Crime Stoppers was created in the Lone Star State by the passage of House Bill 1681 on June 10, 1981. About three months later, the state legislature formed the Texas Crime Stoppers Advisory Council within the Criminal Justice Division of the governor's office.

The Governor's Crime Stoppers program certifies local nonprofit programs, thus making them eligible to receive probation fees paid by probationers.

In turn, the local Crime Stoppers efforts, such as the one in Gillespie County, pay rewards for tip information that leads to the arrest and/or indictment of criminals.

"This reward program was established for the purpose of obtaining information, which might not otherwise be obtained, about criminal activity and fugitives throughout the state," Folsie said.

Currently, he added, the Gillespie County Crime Stoppers program receives an amount of up to \$50 for each person sentenced to probation in District Court cases.

"The idea is to allow the criminal to help pay for a system that assists in the criminal's apprehension," said Folsie.

This funding, however, can only be used to pay for rewards. Other expenditures, such as administrative costs, must come from other sources, such as donations from businesses, community organizations and citizens.

## Crime Stoppers in Gillespie County

Folsie mentioned that the principle of the Crime Stoppers program is that "someone other than the criminal has information that can solve a crime." The program, he added, was established to help fight three major problems faced by law enforcement in generating that information:

- Fear of reprisal;
- An attitude of apathy; and,
- Reluctance to get involved.

But Folsie added that Crime Stoppers resolves those difficulties by offering anonymity to people who provide information on crimes and by paying rewards when information supplied leads to an arrest.

But for Crime Stoppers to be most effective, he went on, there must be a partnership between the community, media and law enforcement.

Current chairman Troy Ottmers mentioned that GCCS is designed to help crack cases throughout the county, not just in Fredericksburg.

"We serve the whole community," he said, adding that the local Crime Stoppers effort is "for every citizen of the county."

How the system works

Folsie explained the scenario for the public taking advantage of the Crime Stoppers system.

"When a citizen calls the Gillespie County Crime Stoppers (997-8477), it is answered in the sheriff's office communications center by a dispatcher," he said.

Folsie emphasized that this telephone line has no identifying features to it — no Caller ID, no \*69 — for example.

From there, the tipster is assigned a code number, and the tip report is sent to local law enforcement for investigation.

Folsie went on to say that because GCCS doesn't want to know the identity of the tipster, the caller is instructed to call Crime Stoppers back in four to five weeks to check up on the reward status of their case.

If the tip resulted in the arrest or otherwise clearing of the case, the tipster is eligible for a reward of up to \$1,000.

"Rewards may also be made for information leading to the recovery of stolen property, the seizure of illegal drugs or an arrest on an outstanding warrant," the sheriff's deputy added.

If money is to be paid out, as determined by the Crime Stoppers board of directors, the tipster is then instructed on how to collect the reward.

## Crime Stoppers in the public schools

Another important aspect of the local program is the Crime Stoppers School Program.

But Folse was quick to point out that “the existence of Crime Stoppers does not indicate that a school has a crime or drug problem, but teaches a proactive not reactive approach to administrators, students, parents and the community by publicizing a safer school environment.”

The school program, he added, is also a way for students to feel safe to report school crimes anonymously without fear of retaliation. “This program encourages the development of responsibility,” he said.

## Importance of Crime Stoppers to law enforcement

The GCCS program gives the chance for anybody in the city or county to help out in solving crimes.

“Crime Stoppers provides every individual in Gillespie County the opportunity to do something about crime that is happening in their own community,” said Gillespie County Sheriff Buddy Mills.

“In a world where most people feel disempowered, Crime Stoppers empowers individuals to make a difference by reporting criminals or criminal activity with complete anonymity,” Mills added. “I, along with all members of the sheriff’s office, support Crime Stoppers.”

Fredericksburg Police Chief Paul Oestreich echoed the sheriff’s sentiment about GCCS.

“Crime Stoppers is a partnership that works to keep our community safer by offering cash rewards to citizens who remain anonymous and provide information regarding criminal activity. It is important for all citizens to have a stake in making their community a safer place to work, learn, and live.”

## The value of tips to GCCS

According to Folse, recent tips to the local Crime Stoppers program have led to the solving of several crimes in both the City of Fredericksburg and out in Gillespie County. Some of those actions are highlighted below:

- Two subjects selling drugs out of residence in the city.

- Subject selling marijuana at fast food restaurant drive-through in the city.
- Fugitive from Missouri arrested on burglary charges at a residence on State Highway 16 North in the county.
- Two arrests of subjects manufacturing methamphetamine at residence in the county.
- Three arrests of subjects cooking methamphetamine at residence in the county.
- Two arrests of subjects selling drugs out of residence in the city.
- One arrest for criminal mischief at Fredericksburg Middle School.
- An arrest for possession of more than two ounces of marijuana at Fredericksburg Middle School.
- One arrest for possessing a handgun at Fredericksburg Middle School.
- Arrest of subject in an aggravated assault case in the city.
- One arrest for possession of drug paraphernalia in the county.

The liaison officer added that during the time that the GCCS program has been in existence, 197 tips have been received from the public, and from those calls, 165 arrests have been made with 170 cases cleared.

In addition, Folse mentioned that five wanted fugitives have been arrested.

In all, nearly \$28,000 in stolen property has been recovered, with an addition \$61,000 (estimated value) in drugs have been seized.

Major fundraising effort coming in September

To assist the local Crime Stoppers effort, a fundraiser will be held Sept. 8 at the rejuvenated Pat's Hall, featuring singer-songwriter Thomas Michael Riley.

The fundraiser is slated to begin at 7 p.m.

According to event organizer, Sarah Eckert, the fundraiser has a two-pronged purpose. First, it's obviously designed to raise money for the local Crime Stoppers program — to pay for rewards as well as support

administrative and other costs. But the second reason for the event is to “also make people more aware of Crime Stoppers.”

She mentioned that tickets which will cost \$25 each, can be purchased at Hill Country State Bank or at the door on the night of the concert.

In addition to Riley’s performance, Eckert said the night would be filled with a silent auction as well as prize drawings.

She indicated that sponsorships are available for businesses, organizations or individuals.

More information about the fundraiser can be obtained by contacting the GCCS at the following address: [gillespiecountycrimestoppers@gmail.com](mailto:gillespiecountycrimestoppers@gmail.com).

THE CURRENT board of the Gillespie Country Crime Stoppers program is made up of the following people: left to right, seated — Annabel Wilkinson, Gesena Houy, treasurer; Joanne Martin, secretary; Tony Klein, vice chairman; Troy Ottmers, chairman and Sarah Eckert; standing — Gillespie County Sheriff Buddy Mills, Mary Krebs, Marcus Vidrine, Todd Willingham, Calvin Otte, Dick Stuewe, GCSO Deputy Joe Folse (liaison officer), and City of Fredericksburg Police Chief Paul Oestreich.