

Victory for neighborhood against drug dealers

By Heather Angney

STAFF WRITER

EAST PALO ALTO — Memories of the loud parties, drug dealing and screeching tires are still fresh in the minds of the neighborhood crusaders who put a stop to them.

After taking the owner of a nearby crack house to court, five feisty neighbors feel victorious. They drove the crack-dealing tenants out of their neighborhood and made the crack house's landlord feel a sting as well — a total of \$25,000 in court-imposed penalties.

The five people who came together to make their street feel like a neighborhood are still revved up about the battle and ready to share their strategy with other homeowners.

The neighbors — a lively variety of folks including a feisty municipal employee and mother, a technology-savvy cowboy and a repair man with a yardful of appliances — banded together for the last few years and complained to any official who would listen about the loud music, drug-dealing and general chaos that emerged from the house at 2362 Palo Verde Ave.

They picketed outside the house, repeatedly called the police and wrote letters complaining to the landlord.

None of those strategies ended the trouble.

So the five neighbors took the landlord to small claims court. Three days after the neighbors filed their

suit, the tenants moved out. And now, the house has new owners.

The lawyer for the former owner declined to discuss the case and the owner was unavailable for comment.

The five neighbors had no lawyer, but one of them, Estela Guerrero, a Menlo Park city employee, spent time in a law library and with the help of a student discovered a case in Alameda County in which 75 neighbors successfully took the owners of an apartment building to small claims court. The neighbors said the building was a nuisance because of illegal activity the owners allowed to occur there.

In the East Palo Alto case, Guerrero and her neighbors wrote down license plate numbers and documented all the comings and goings from the house, the vandalism, the break-ins and the speeding cars. They kept track of the time they spent standing in front of the house with signs and contacting police, public officials and the owner.

In the end, a judge ruled in their favor and they each won \$5,000, less than they say they lost in stolen property and headaches. But symbolically the neighbors felt victorious, especially since the "crack monsters," as the appliance repairman Ken Hahn calls them, had moved out.

"East Palo Alto has got a name as a bad town, but there are good people here, and they want to make this a good place to live," said Doug Harrington, an electrical foreman.



MATT SUMNER

East Palo Alto neighbors Doug and Deneise Harrington, left, and Estela Guerrero and Ken Hahn, along with Claudy Thomas (not pictured), took the owner of a neighborhood crack house to court and won.