

Riding along — quietly

Little happens Friday
as reporter joins officer

By Shannon Rasmussen
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It's early Friday night in East Palo Alto, and it's as if the streets have come alive with activity.

In some areas, residents remain in their homes watching television in a quiet tree-lined neighborhood. Yet, in other parts of the city, drug dealers have picked a dark street to possibly make their deals. Other people roam about liquor stores and vacant corner lots.

For East Palo Alto police officers, a Friday night is just like any other day of the week — time to do their job protecting the city's citizens.

Despite a reputation for crime, East Palo Alto is full of hard-working people who want to see the city succeed, said Tom Burns, a reserve officer who was patrolling Friday night.

"You're helping people," he said. "A majority of the people here are good people. They're hard-working."

"We know what's potentially out there. We know it's dangerous, but we accept that and we do it."

"It's really quiet tonight," Burns said about his Friday shift. "That's good. We need a quiet night."

This week in particular has been an emotional and trying week for the East Palo Alto Police Department.

Police Officer Joel Davis was slain Wednesday after he chased a gunman through Jack Farrell Park and into a neighboring street.

Burns said he chose to work in East Palo Alto after talking about it with Davis, his friend and next-door neighbor Davis.



Times Tribune photo by Sarah Rosenbaum

Officer Charlie Hines aides a possible hit-and-run victim while waiting for the paramedics to arrive Friday night, an unusually quiet night for policemen in East Palo Alto.

ing the week and a reserve officer on many weekends. He joined the East Palo Alto police about a year ago after serving as a reserve officer in Los Gatos for six years.

As a reserve officer, he works as a police officer part time.

Burns said he and Davis had rebuilt car B8, the vehicle assigned to reserve officers.

Some nights are ridden with activity, others are quiet, Burns said as he drove through what he described as one of the city's drug-dealing hotspots.

He turned his spotlight on some suspicious loiterers, then checked several abandoned homes.

As he drove down one street, someone yelled "roller" (street slang for patrol car) while someone else set off an alarm that sounded like a siren, apparently as a warning that a police officer was in the vicinity.

Friday evening, Burns and other police officers rushed to a possible hit-and-run accident on one side of town and a reported fight at an active and well-lit liquor store near the Bayshore Freeway.

The accident victim was treated by Menlo Park Fire District firefighters. The "fight" turned out to be a two-car accident that drew a cluster of curious bystanders.

"It's like anywhere else. There are times when there is little to do," Burns explained.

Then there are the nights when officers have one call after another and a 12-hour shift suddenly becomes longer, he said.

One Friday night, he remembered having four on-duty officers respond to five different calls about fights involving weapons — all within 20 minutes.

As he drove through the city Friday, he pointed out one area where a stabbing recently took place and

another corner known for drug sales.

He also drove through neighborhoods where East Palo Alto residents are working hard to keep up their yards and homes, to make the city an attractive place to live.

"It's a city with a lot of potential," he said. "We see people who are very concerned with what is happening."

Many people were walking the streets Friday, a normal occurrence in East Palo Alto, Burns said.

"People walk all night," he said. He slowly drove through various parking lots and asked people what was happening.

Sometimes, Burns said, he receives only cold stares, at other times he is greeted with vulgarities, and sometimes he gets a friendly answer.

"Hopefully we're helping," Burns said.