

Lamar County Crime Stoppers – History

By William (Buddy) Heuberger

July 4, 1985 began as a normal day for John (not his real name) along with his wife and their three month old daughter. They left their home and traveled to Roxton, Texas to watch the annual fireworks display. As they left the fireworks show around 10 PM, they were behind a vehicle occupied by two males. The vehicle was traveling at a slow rate of speed and appeared to be having mechanical problems. The vehicle stopped at a stop sign and failed to proceed. John exited his car and went to the driver's door where the driver got belligerent and asked John what he wanted. John responded, "I thought you were having trouble and stopped to see if I could help." A major confrontation then occurred and quickly escalated.

The driver exited his vehicle and being to attack John. The passenger soon joined in the attack. John's wife got out of their car with a 357 pistol and fired a shot over the heads of the attackers. John was badly beaten and had blood in his eyes but asked his wife to give him the gun. She refused. A neighbor nearby heard the gunshot and called 911. John got the pistol from his wife and was able to fire a shot at the attacker's vehicle as the attackers fled the scene. John was taken to the hospital by ambulance to be treated for his wounds.

His attackers were apprehended a few days later. They pled not guilty but were later convicted. It was determined the attackers were local drug users.

The story could end here, but this was the beginning of Lamar County Crime Stoppers.

John just happened to be a close acquaintance of local Kiwanian W. G. (Hoot) Gibson, a local rancher. Hoot approached Kiwanis President George Kimbrough and expressed his concern over the increasing drug problem in the Lamar County.

As a result of his concern, a committee composed of local law enforcement officials, the county attorney, school officials, and Kiwanian's were appointed, and a series of early-morning meetings began to search for a plan to combat the growing drug problem. As the meetings continued, it became clear that the drug problem was interwoven with crime in general, and that it was impossible to separate the two. There were those who committed burglary to support their drug habit, there were assaults committed by those under the influence of drugs, and there were those who illegally sold the drugs in order to make an easy dollar.

The committee recommended that a general crime prevention effort be initiated, targeted not only at illegal use of drugs, but at all crime, particularly felonies.

George Kimbrough served as interim chairman of what was to become Crime Stoppers, calling the first meeting of the Lamar County Crime Stoppers to order on January 30, 1986, with 18 board members representing a variety of interests present. From that meeting, Kiwanian Charles Christian was elected first Lamar County Crime Stoppers chairman. Kiwanian Reggie McDowra was elected vice chairman, and Sylvia Tongson was elected secretary. The president of The First National Bank, Don Hoffman, was named treasurer.

Lamar County Sheriff's Deputy Bill Ohl, instrumental in helping get the fledgling program moving, was selected as the first Crime Stoppers coordinator.

One of the new board's first orders of business was completion of a grant application to the Governor's Office, Criminal Justice Division, seeking funds to help promote the program and to provide travel funds so Ohl could attend out-of-town Crime Stoppers training. That application, completed in February, 1986, sought a grant of \$8,855. The board was delighted when Christian was notified on April 23, 1986, that the application had been approved and that a grant of \$8,652 would be forthcoming. That money, among other things, was used to purchase a variety of promotional items, including bumper stickers and newspaper advertising containing the now-familiar phone number of 785-TIPS.

Crime Stoppers was well on its way to becoming a viable program as the word spread and community support gained momentum.

In keeping with Kiwanis tradition, the club was there to identify a need, to place the wheels in motion to meet that need, then to move on to other opportunities as it continues to work to make Paris and Lamar County an even better place to call home.

Almost 30 years later Lamar County Crime Stoppers is one of the most successful crime stoppers programs in Texas.