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All That Glitters in Orinda

Jewelry, silverware and laptops tempting to burglars

By Laurie Snyder

Diamonds are forever... a target. Yet plasma TVs are apparently now passe for thieves bent on celebrating Christmas whenever it strikes their fancy. Tempted by the promise of quick scores and fast getaways, the stickiest of fingers have been grabbing items which are easy to transport - family heirlooms, rare currency, laptops, and even silverware - in what Orinda police are calling a slight spike in residential burglaries.

In reality, this type of theft remains rare, and is actually dropping in Orinda - eight incidents in July, down from the 10 and 11 in May and June, respectively. But, when it does happen, it can be traumatic for entire neighborhoods, which is why Orinda Police Chief Scott Haggard and his team have been hard at work running robbers to the ground - and keeping others from even reaching residents' doorsteps.

About 90 percent of Orinda burglaries begin during the daytime via side garage doors and "slides in the back" of homes, observes Haggard. Working in pairs, one perpetrator drives the car and serves as a lookout - while the other one does the deed, using tools wrapped in a sweatshirt to muffle the sounds of breaking glass. Once inside, they go for the gold - literally. Rings, collectibles and anything else that's shiny and lightweight.

Police recently uncovered an assortment of these items in Antioch. In addition to things taken from an Orinda home, the officers also found cash and market-ready methamphetamine - plus a gun stolen from a home in Oakley.

What Can Orinda Families Do to Better Protect Themselves?

Many current homeowners were trained decades ago by safety-conscious parents to turn at least a porch light on before leaving the house. The problem with that, explains Haggard, is that today's budding banditti are observant. They notice, from one day to the next, when porch lights are left on at houses where owners seem to be away, and whether or not the same interior lights pop on at the same time each day.

It seems counterintuitive, but it turns out that it's actually better to leave the porch light off when you head out for a night on the town. Haggard also advises residents to install motion-sensitive external lights and cut back shrubbery where creeping crooks might be able to hide from patrolling police. In addition, rather than turning lamps on in front rooms, light up the home's interior. This gives the impression that family members are home watching television or reading.

In addition, he says, "If you have an alarm, set it." The last two attempted break-ins in Orinda were thwarted by noisy alarms.

Then, make it impossible for intruders to get what they came for. Place heirloom jewelry and pieces worn only on special occasions in a safety deposit box at the bank. The same goes for coin collections and other historic items. The remaining valuables kept at home should be locked in a safe.

You might also try posting a sign to let would-be burglars know that your valuables are stored off site. It's an old trick used by walkers at the Rez, but it works. Many park goers have headed off damage by the smash-and-sprint crowd by posting simple handwritten notes on their parked cars.

And as always, "Look out for one another," and call police right away if you see something suspicious. "You're not wasting our time," stresses Haggard.

If something does seem out of the ordinary, use your cell phone camera to take a picture. If not, at least get a good description of the color or make of the car, or what the suspicious individual was wearing. Even a partial license plate can help. The quicker that police are notified, the quicker they can respond - and that increases the likelihood that they'll be able to catch the offenders.

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