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Moraga Safeway's struggles with bad behavior

By Vera Kochan

In the first week of the new school year, the Safeway store on Moraga Way had already experienced minors stealing candy and other small items, hiding things in their backpacks, observed a theft from the deli section, and stopped a couple of students who were riding their scooters down the store aisles, according to Store Director Jennifer Carter.

John Park, owner of AFC Franchise Corporation's sushi section, operates independently from Safeway. Over the past four years he estimates that his items have been stolen between 200 to 300 times. "I see kids take something and pretend to go to the store's main checkout only to keep walking and go out of the store at the other end without paying," Park stated. "I have come to recognize their faces, and I make them pay at the deli register now."

According to the Director of Public and Government Affairs for Safeway's Northern California Division, Wendy Gutshall, Safeway employs a number of security measures at their stores, including visible deterrents and others that are not immediately apparent. "Theft affects everyone," she said. "Like other retailers, our policy places a premium on employee, customer and bystander safety," adding that for proprietary reasons, they cannot provide step-by-step detail of their shoplifter policy, "because we want to avoid someone using this information to their advantage." She said they work closely and rely on support from local law enforcement when such issues arise at their stores.

Carter wants parents to be aware of what their child might be doing and asks that they remain vigilant. "If I was a parent, I'd want to know what's going on. I would want to be aware," she said. Carter notes that not every student who visits the store misbehaves, but there has been enough wrongful activity, including loud and sometimes screaming behavior, to warrant parental and community attention. "The worst days are when the schools have minimum day and especially on Friday afternoons. Sometimes there are nearly 80 kids in the store."

Patrolling the aisles has become part of the job for Carter. "I've had to walk up and down the aisles, because they like to knock things off the shelves, especially in the paper towel and toilet paper section," she said, noting that she's seen minors "walk through and just stick an arm out, causing everything to fall on the floor."

Safeway has outdoor tables and chairs to the left of the store for customers and employees to use, but Carter says the kids "often have food fights out there, smearing cookies, cupcakes and other food everywhere. They've even sprayed whipped cream around and knocked over the cases of bottled water we have stored out there. Sometimes they break open the cases and have water fights."

Carter hopes that parents can explain potential consequences to their children. "In a few years, if they keep up this type of behavior," she said, "what amounts to \$10 in damages will increase to \$100 and they will be prosecuted as an adult."

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