

# sign of the times

Vandalism is not pretty. Most of us, when we see such destruction in our community – a smashed bus shelter, tagging, a snapped-off road sign – respond with a tut-tut and a mutter about the youth of today, and keep on our way.

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Fortunately for the people of Auckland's North Shore, there is one man who didn't just tut and drive on. John Crews, already active in his community, was so annoyed at the major problems with graffiti in Sunnynook that he rounded up a group of volunteers and – with the help of the local community constable – set about cleaning up his neighbourhood. Twelve years later, the UnTag Trust – the organisation he founded in 1995 – has grown to support a paid staff member and a fully equipped truck to clean up large chunks of the North Shore (two other organisations cover single suburbs in the area).

As with many community organisations, funding was hand-to-mouth in the beginning. Fortunately, John could tap into extensive networks built up over 30 years as a volunteer community patroller. Having worked closely with the community constable, he knew about Blue Light discos; police-run events for young people that generate income for local projects. Such funds helped buy paint, brushes and equipment. In the beginning, teams of four people a week from the North Harbour Rotary Club turned up each Saturday to supervise the clean-up, but since 1998, the Trust has been able to pay staff for 20 hours a week.

UnTag provides a double solution for the community. Young offenders are referred by Police Youth Aid, CYFS or the community constable to work on the tagging clean-up as part of their sentencing or rehabilitation. John suspects that for these young people (from all parts of the social spectrum, he is quick to point out), working side-by-side with an interested grown-up may be the first time some of them have experienced a listening ear.

"We are not counsellors; we are just ordinary people", he explains. "We don't tell them what to do, we let them do the talking. Very often, the more they talk, the more they find their own answers."

The programme is backed by the North Shore City Council, although formal funding only started in 2005. It cleans up graffiti on residences, public buildings and businesses. Tagging is referred to the clean-up hotline via complaints to the council Action-Line, by the community constable, or through direct calls to the UnTag hotline.

John has learned that careful recording and monitoring is essential to the success of his service: Every piece of graffiti is photographed and recorded before it is removed. Information and photos are entered into a council-run database called Tracker, and shared around the city. This data is used to identify persistent tagging re-offenders – taggers like to move around the city and tag in each other's territories. UnTag can have anything between 160 and 570 tags a week to deal with: In 2006 the team tackled more than 4300 tags, using between 60 and 100 litres of paint a month.

Two years ago, as Resene was beginning its PaintWise programme, John and other local groups were offered the recycled paint free for their work. The PaintWise truck splits open old cans or buckets of waterborne paint,



■ Resene Groovy  
□ Resene Half Sea Fog



which results in a good, serviceable grey that carries the in-house monicker EchoPaint, perfect for painting out tags on concrete – tunnels and skate bowls are particular favourites with taggers. In addition, the Trust uses low-cost mistints in a set of key colours, but clients are made aware that the clean-up is not a painting and decorating service.

John wryly notes that, while the service is free, it is the hard-up little old ladies who are more likely to make a donation than the large business customers! Support from Forrest Hill Motors and Autoquest means that the Trust was able to purchase a dedicated paint truck, and keeps it well serviced and on the road.

“There are new taggers coming out on a weekly basis,” says John. “Most of them are around 14 to 18 years old. The thing is, they start off tagging, but then progress to other petty, then not-so-petty crimes”.

John suggests citizens interested in de-tagging their own neighbourhood should first make contact with their local council or community constable. Sound record-keeping is essential, both to monitor the extent of the problem and to support applications for funding. As with many organisations, a core of dedicated volunteers needs to be found to source paint and supplies, manage rosters and clean up duties and... always... raise money. **H**

## do you need free paint for your community organisation?

Resene donates good-condition paint and grey waterborne paint collected through the Resene PaintWise service to not-for-profit organisations and schools. If your community group is interested in receiving free paint, complete Resene’s online registration form at [www.resene.co.nz/paintwise.htm](http://www.resene.co.nz/paintwise.htm). All paints are waterborne, and colours and sheens will vary, so recipients must be prepared to accept it on an ‘as is’ basis. It will all be marked and labelled. Resene will contact successful applicants as paint becomes available.

## keep the nasties away

To limit the possibility of your property being vandalised by tagging:

- > Remove tags as soon as they appear – one tag attracts more.
- > If possible, photograph the tags and report them to your local police station or council.
- > Choose hedging or metal fencing instead of block, plaster or timber around your property boundary.
- > Install security nightlights to illuminate possible tagging sites.
- > If your streetfront boundary does comprise an unbroken surface that will be appealing to taggers, coat it with an anti-graffiti surface such as Resene Uracryl. Once cured you will be able to quickly wash away any graffiti using Resene Graffiti Remover without damaging the paint finish.