

Wheeler Cowperthwaite
wheeler@nevadaappeal.com

January 4, 2013

Men in orange: Inmate work crews help clean graffiti



Shannon Litz / Nevada Appeal A graffiti clean-up crew works at the Save Mart store on Highway 50 on Thursday morning.

Four men clad in orange from beanies on their heads to jumpsuits down to their ankles piled out of the work truck and opened the back of the covered bed.

The men pull out rollers and a bucket of tan paint. Their motive: to work covering the recently tagged walls, their unlabored breaths forming white clouds in the just-past-dawn air, their paint letting off the same white wisps on the walls.

"We do nasty little jobs," said Don Quilici, outside work crew coordinator. "We cover it as fast as we can or we clean it and we try to match the paint if we can. We can even sand fences."

Quilici, a broad-shouldered man with a trimmed yet rambunctious and mostly pepper beard, motioned to a wall defaced by a series of letters.

"This is what I see," he said, the wall on one side and the back of a grocery store on the other. "I don't see artwork. I see trash."

The taggers had been out en force as the calendar turned to 2013, despite the biting cold.

The graffiti is more properly defined as tagging, rather than the elaborate images in multiple colors the word graffiti can evoke. Quilici held up his hand, his fingers almost pressed together, indicating that the gang related graffiti is less than a single percent of what the work crew finds and covers.

Josh Emborsky was happy to be out in the cold.

"I get to get out of the jail," Emborsky said. Emborsky, who has been on the crew for a month, is looking forward, just a little, to warmer weather.

"I've never actually seen artwork yet," he said, motioning to a crude smiley face, "this (stuff's) stupid right here."

While Emborsky has only been on the crew for a month, the veteran of the group, Farron Cook, who has clocked three months so far, said he sees the same graffiti over and over.

"It's all the same stuff," he said. "Stupid little tags."

Although it is the same tags over and over, he still enjoys covering tags more than anything else the work crew does, such as sweeping sidewalks, cleaning culverts, painting curbs, weeding and other jobs.

"A lot of work at the cemetery, going down to the park and picking up dog poop and trash, whatever the community needs us to do," Quilici said.

He keeps a log which can help investigators and the district attorney's office to link a tagger to a series of incidents, rather than just the one caught red-handed.

"If I do this, deputies can do work that they should be doing," Quilici said. "For me, this is fun."

Quilici is a civilian, although he has been working with inmate work crews for a long time, Sheriff Ken Furlong said.

Quilici himself is not paid by the city but rather with the funds generated by the jail's commissary, where inmates are able to buy certain items during their stay in jail.

The graffiti program, started about a year ago, was an evolution that started with an offer to start a work program out of the jail, Furlong said.

"I allowed the team to start responding to graffiti," Furlong said. "I realized there wasn't a coordinated response to graffiti, really, that annoying tagging on the corner."

After meeting with various city offices, Furlong gave the crews permission to clean up graffiti everywhere without needing to first ask for permission. The graffiti abatement is a three-pronged approach, with alternative sentencing, public works and the inmate work crews, who do a 100 to 1 ratio of the work, "hands down," he said.

"If the public doesn't see it, we're doing our job," Quilici said.

Quilici said he has yet to have an inmate run away. The inmates all have sentences of a year or less. If their sentences were longer, they would be serving with the Nevada Department of Corrections.

Cook said he too, like Emborsky, likes to be outside. "It's not bad. It's just nice to be out."

It doesn't hurt that he likes their boss, Quilici.

"Don's super cool," Cook said. "I wouldn't have a better boss to do this."

Working on the crew has its upsides: fresh, albeit often times below-freezing air, time away from the jail, work to occupy the time, a boost in self-esteem. Once in a while residents will come up and thank the inmates for picking up trash, weeding or other maintenance. Much of the time, when the crew faces the public, they get nasty stares.

"We get looks like we're murderers and rapists a lot," Emborsky said.

"They think that we're out to hurt people and stuff," Cook said. "Out at the park, there's people who know we go out there and say thank you."

The looks rarely progress to words, he said. "Nobody really says much."

The crew, packed into two-door Chevy truck donated by Southwest Gas, goes out four times a week, often first starting with the early morning graffiti rounds. Quilici drives his crew of inmates on their route.

"We call it the loop, areas that are constantly getting hit. We check everywhere we can."

The inmates get out their rollers and cover the graffiti in blocks.

"We always try to make it look as nice as possible," Emborsky said.

Making it look as nice as possible does not come cheap. Because each gallon of paint is costly, the program looks for the community to donate leftover paint rather than footing the bill for a new can, a costly prospect at the average cost of \$30 per gallon.

"That's expensive," Quilici said. "A lot of it we paint over. A lot of it we clean."

When anyone asks Quilici which colors the program will take, he replies that they will take any color that can be mixed in a five gallon bucket. Every gallon donated is \$30 saved. When one resident donated nine gallons of leftover house paint, she didn't think it was much. For Quilici, it was a big deal. She had just saved the program \$270.

The program is looking for donations of house paint. They can be brought to the sheriff's office or the crew can pick them up. Pick-ups can be arranged by calling Quilici at 775-721-6619.

To report graffiti, one can call dispatch at 887-2007 and to report a tagger in the act, Quilici advises calling 911.