

SONIC

from page A1

its second year. Officers from Farmington Hills and Novi departments make up the undercover unit, which has been responsible for numerous drug arrests — 100 alone in 1998.

One of those involved shutting down a 60-kilo cocaine distribution network.

During the first six months this year, SONIC has been responsible for 62 arrests. Of those, 42 were for felonies.

"I think drug use is at an all-time high in this country. Farmington Hills is no different," said Hills police Chief Bill Dwyer. "However, we think we're taking a more aggressive attack on the drug traffic that's out there compared to other cities."

"I don't think there's been another unit that's been as successful as SONIC. It's a very effective unit with very well-trained officers."

SONIC's expertise is not limited to narcotics, either.

The unit played a crucial role during the recent hunt for a man suspected of trying to lure young girls into his truck. Though the man shaved his head and painted his pick-up in an attempt to elude authorities, SONIC officers trailed him for a week so an arrest could be made.

The unit has also been instrumental in cracking burglary cases as well as prostitution and gambling rings.

In drug cases, the unit has largely been effective in picking off drug traffic passing through city limits.

This case is different, though. Drug dealers have set up operations in the city.

Authorities believe crack is not only being sold but possibly made in the apartment residence.

A tip led SONIC to investigate possible drug activity at Gateway Apartments.

Farmington Hills police Officer Mike Farley made three undercover buys, setting up this night's sting operation.

Farley makes arrangements to make one more crack buy to solidify the case.

On paper, the plan is simple: After the undercover buy, marked officers will stop and arrest the dealers. SONIC then will execute a search warrant of the apartment.

Except drug dealers, especially

Once at the apartment, they move swiftly through an entrance door and shout their presence. However, they find the key a manager gave them doesn't work.

those selling — not to mention using — crack are not known for their predictable behavior.

Officers meet with SONIC's narcotics unit supervisor Bob Burkart behind a strip mall on Middlebelt and 12 Mile.

"Colonel," a Novi police drug-sniffing dog, joins them.

Once the German shepherd's highly sensitive nose gets a narcotics whiff, he scratches and bites wildly at the source, says Novi officer Randy Mince.

"When he starts to bark, they (drug couriers) usually tell us where it is," Mince says.

Meanwhile, SONIC's surveillance unit maintains vigil outside a known west side Detroit crack house. They watch a white Expedition, which they expect the dealers to return to Farmington Hills in.

"One thing about dope deals," Burkart says, "it never goes smoothly."

His words prove prophetic.

Dilatory dealers

The dealers fail to show for their appointment. The undercover officer phones his supplier and is told he's on the highway on route to the apartment.

However, the white Expedition remains parked at the Detroit residence, surveillance officers report back by radio.

"Not only is he a drug dealer," Nebus says, "he's a liar."

Another phone call is made and the undercover officer finds that the dealer returned to the apartment in a different car.

The drug buy is still on. Those behind the strip mall start to leave.

"Now I feel bad," Nebus says in mock disdain. "Maybe he was on his way and here I called him a liar."

An hour later, "Colonel" scratches at an entry inside the green Mazda while the three

occupants stand near a patrol car handcuffed. Mince and Hills Officer Gary Levin find spent marijuana roaches and a half-full bottle of Heineken.

As the dog barks repeatedly, the driver crosses his legs while standing handcuffed.

At the Farmington Hills police station, SONIC's Farley displays the product of two crack buys.

One is "professionally" wrapped in a plastic, he notes. The other is packaged in paper towel. In the second sample, the crack is crudely in color and residue bleeds onto the paper towel.

"They ripped us off," Farley says, examining the crack wrapped in plastic wrap bought earlier.

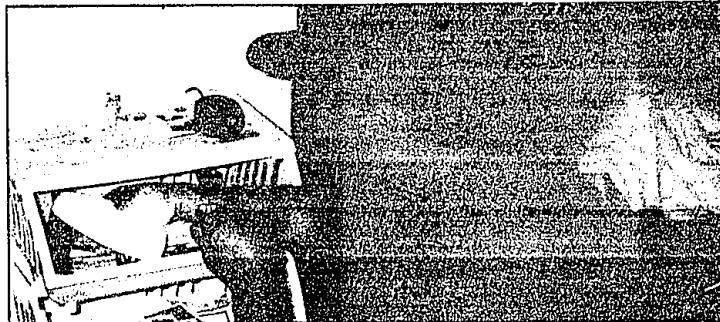
He weighs the contents on a small digital scale. "Oh no they didn't," he corrects himself looking at the LCD reading that states .90 grams.

An undercover officer paid \$200 for the small pack which consists of a smattering of yellow pebbles. A crack addict would burn through it in an hour, Farley says.

Farley drops a piece of crack into a plastic glass tube and snaps it to activate the chemicals. The liquid inside freezes and turns a Tidy Bowl blue, which means it tests positive for crack cocaine.

Inside an office marked SONIC in label tape, officers compare bills taken from the three men and photocopies of those used in the undercover buys. At least \$335 is recovered and matched with money used for undercover buys. Police seize another \$148, which goes into the drug forfeiture fund.

The early morning lull in the otherwise empty Farmington Hills investigative bureau is interrupted when SONIC's surveillance crew returns to the station from assignments in Detroit. Most shake their heads in disbelief. Burkart called them back though the Expedition was still parked there.



Search bin: A SONIC officer rummages through belongings in an attempt to find evidence in an apartment unit where authorities believe crack cocaine was being sold.

"Too many things were going on," says Sergeant Al Soderlund, who oversees the surveillance unit.

In the office, one undercover officer with a ponytail and a beard chugs from a Gatorade bottle while another relates how a prostitute asked one of them "for a date." Drugs deals were brazenly taking place in the open as the night progressed, they say.

Half-time chalk talk

After setting, they plot strategy on how to execute the search warrant. One suggests they ask one of the three men in custody for an apartment key in order to make a "soft entry."

"Especially if he wants his security deposit back," the officer adds with a laugh.

After an office check, none of the three arrested has a key. Farley phones an apartment manager, who agrees to give him one.

Officers then file outside and congregated in the police station parking lot. As part of a ritual, they strap on bulletproof vests, pull up leather gloves and secure small pistols on leg holsters.

A couple take a last few puffs on cigarettes and stub them out as Burkart recites details, including where the nearest hospital is located.

Once at the apartment, they move swiftly through an entrance door and shout their presence. However, they find the key a manager gave them doesn't work.

"Got the battering ram," an

officer shouts.

Within a minute, a SONIC officer is thrusting the long black steel object into the door, which springs open with a loud thud. Officers rush in with weapons drawn and find the apartment empty.

A search turns up plastic coin bags, burnt marijuana roaches and baking powder.

A neighbor watches from across the hall. Officers know her and her brother.

When the undercover officer pulled into the apartment complex for an earlier buy, she raced from her patio to intercept him in the driveway to beg for a rock from whom she thought was a fellow crack user.

"Hey, it's good to see you," she says to officers milling around the hallway. "John, I have to say, you're looking a little older since the last time I saw you."

Another officer turns away, unable to believe what he's hearing. "It's good to see you?" he repeats incredulously.

She allows officers to also search through her barren apartment. "Colonel" sniffs along walls and closets but doesn't turn up anything.

"Do you want to check my storage area? I want to do everything I can to cooperate," she says.

The wiry, thinly built woman with blonde hair who is wearing a T-shirt and cutoffs reveals she didn't need a welcoming committee to get to know her new neighbors. "If they smoke crack, they're a friend," she says.

Her crack life

Without much prompting, the woman shares her own story of addiction.

She says she got hooked on cocaine while working at a Royal Oak drug paraphernalia shop when the powdered substance was en vogue. Back then, users included politicians, lawyers and other corporate types, she recalls almost wistfully.

"That started the downward spiral," she says warily.

She and her brother, who is laying on the couch while officers walk around, live in an apartment where her parents paid rent. Her dad died recently. She also suffers from seizures.

Her father's dying wish was for his daughter to get into a substance abuse program. She pledges to get help.

"Otherwise, they'll find me dead," she says ominously.

As officers continue to search through her neighbors' apartment, she pulls up a chair and watches from her doorway. SONIC officers don't find much in terms of drugs, money or weapons.

"It wasn't a big stash, but it was a good ride home. Bust," Nebus says as adrenaline wanes and paperwork begins.

The woman, who has likely lost her most convenient drug source, agrees.

"I'm relieved to get it over with," she says. "It's like an alcoholic living next to a bar. I'm not that strong yet."

THE
Observer & Eccentric
NEWSPAPERS

HOME TOWN
Newspapers

Job Fair

LAUREL MANOR, LIVONIA, WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 1999 11 a.m. - 7 p.m.

A GREAT OPPORTUNITY

The people you need will be there. Will you?

We've received many positive comments about our first two Job Fairs and want you to experience personally how effective they are. If you've participated in the past, you've already discovered their value to your recruitment program.

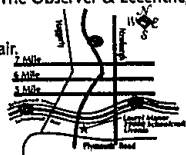
We're pleased to offer you this opportunity to be part of our third Job Fair and save at the same time!

Our September 29 Job Fair is \$675* and includes:

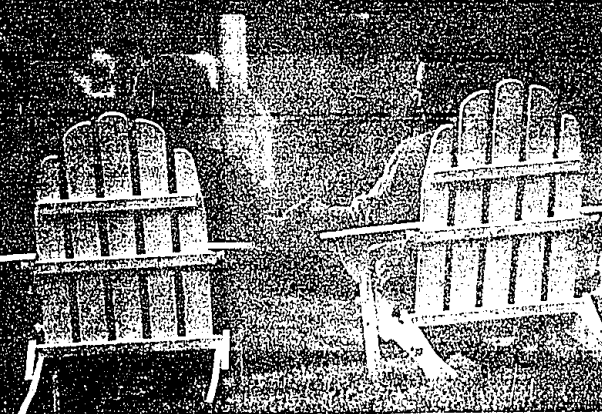
- One quarter page ad in our official JOB FAIR supplement with distribution to more than 265,000 households.
- An 8-foot skirted table and chairs (no booths, please).
- Box lunches for two (2) staffers (additional lunches available for \$12 each).
- Inclusion in all Fair advertising and editorial in The Observer & Eccentric, HomeTown, and Mirror Newspapers.
- Inclusion on our Web Sites promotion of the Fair.
- Radio promotion on 20 stations.
- An excellent opportunity to meet prospective employees.

To reserve your space, or for more information,
call 734-953-2070

*We must receive your payment no later than September 1, 1999



A mortgage rate that'll put you at ease.



Now you can enjoy the comfort of a low rate from a company you can depend on—GMAC Mortgage. We're backed by GMAC, America's leader in auto financing for more than 80 years. It's no wonder, then, that people put their trust in us every day when they're looking to buy or refinance a home.

6.50%/7.24%APR
15-Year Fixed Rate

Local Offices
Apply Over The Phone
Fast Credit Decisions

To apply for this great rate, call today.
1.877.750.GMAC

*A \$100,000 15-year loan repaid with 20% down at 6.50% (7.24% APR) with 3 points (\$3,000) paid would result in 180 monthly payments of principal and interest of \$871.11 per month. Taxes and insurance are extra. The 15-year fixed interest of 6.50% (7.24% APR) is for a limited period of time and only applies to new applications received on or before 7/31/99 with loan closing and funding taking place by 9/15/99. Applicants must look in the advertisement. Terms and conditions apply as well as loan fees and charges. Call for complete details.

GMAC
Mortgage

GMAC and subsidiary employees and GMAC Finance and Insurance employees are also eligible for our Family First Program

Trout Plint Saginaw Detroit Taylor Lansing Clarkson Grand Rapids
Flint Port Huron Plymouth Ann Arbor Kalamazoo Lake Orion Clinton Township