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San Francisco

OCEAN VIEW

Boys and violence

"Lord of the Flies" author William Golding on the murder of a 2-year-old. And Oakland mother Meredith Maran on raising kids in a battle zone. [D-1]

OMI: a tale of drugs, urban decay

Residents of once-desirable Ingleside District terrorized by armed dope dealers

By Leslie Goldberg
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

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With a 9mm semi-automatic pistol shoved in his pants, John Lewis stood in his doorway, waiting for his wife to come home. As she got out of the car, he looked past her, focusing on the two young men standing on a corner at Plymouth Avenue and Broad Street in San Francisco. He closed the door quickly behind her and said, "It's quiet tonight."

Over the past year and a half, the Lewises' neighborhood has been taken over by dozens of gun-toting drug dealers. Shots can be heard at night about once a week, sometimes repeatedly during an evening. There have been drug-related assaults and murders. Neighbors have been threatened, property destroyed.

Sometimes as many as 20 young men, most wearing hooded sweat

FIRST PERSON

shirts or Raiders jackets, stand directly in front of the Lewises' home. "They don't say anything," said Joan Lewis. "But sometimes they'll get right next to me or behind me as I unlock my front door — the idea is intimidation."

Most evenings, the Lewises shut off the lights and retire to the back of the house to avoid the possibility of getting shot.

Since December, they have not left their home unattended for more than 2½ hours. Joan, an artist, quit her \$1,000-a-month job so she could stay home and call the police if something happened.

A week ago something did happen: The rear window of their car, parked on the street, was destroyed. Police found three shell casings and believe the glass was shot out.

On Dec. 5, Joan Lewis said, the corner hoodlums threatened to burn their house down. "They yelled at me that they would burn it down if I called the police."

The same day, a young man was shot several times in the abdomen near the same intersection. "We heard the gunfire and went outside," she said. "We saw him lying there bleeding in the street and there were two girls standing over him screaming."

Joan and John Lewis, who drives a truck for a San Francisco cabinet company, pay \$2,200 a year in property tax. "It seems to me that when you buy a house, you enter into a partnership with the city," said Joan Lewis. "They

[See FIRST PERSON, A-10]



◆ *FIRST PERSON from A-1*

S.F. district's descent into hell

should be accountable for safety on these streets."

Ghostly quiet

Residents call this part of San Francisco the OMI, short for the Ocean View/Merced Heights/Ingleside district. Flanked by S.F. State and City College, this was once a typical middle-class, ethnically mixed San Francisco neighborhood. Now it's showing the classic markers of urban decay: broken glass on the sidewalk, bars on the windows and too many liquor stores.

One of the worst corners in the area — Plymouth and Broad — is about three blocks from an exit off Interstate 280, making it a convenient stop for drive-up drug shoppers.

During the day, a ghostly quiet settles over much of the area. Practically no one is on the street except small groups of young men hanging out on some of the corners, sometimes counting big wads of money or leaning into the windows of cars that have stopped. At night, the volume is turned up: tires screech, stereos blare, voices ring out and, sometimes, shots are fired.

About six years ago the crack epidemic started infecting OMI, but many residents didn't notice.

"I've lived here 12 years and I never had any trouble until a year

6 Examiner First Person line. The Lewises were afraid, but agreed to be interviewed, names in the paper, if it might bring help. Photos would be too dangerous, they said.

The Examiner interviewed more than 40 people who live or work in the area. Most were so frightened by the violence menacing the area that they didn't even want their names in the paper.

One longtime resident described himself as a veteran of World War II, Korea and Vietnam, and confided that his closest brush with death came not in combat but in front of his house on Plymouth Avenue when a gunfight broke out.

One woman said, "I have a 4-year-old daughter; I can't take the risk (of retaliation from the dealers)."

Another resident, who lives near Plymouth and Broad, refused to give his name. "Are you kidding?" he asked. "Look what happened to Minnie Ward."

Ten rounds of ammunition

Minnie and Lovey Ward are well known in the OMI. Now retired, they've lived there 33 years and raised six children. The inside of their two-story, stucco home is elegant: A single red tulip rests in a vase atop a glass-top coffee table surrounded by fashionable white sofas. An oriental black lacquer table stands in the dining room. Mirrors cover the walls.

Two years ago, 10 rounds of ammunition shattered the decor. Their 9-year-old grandson was in the house at the time.

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About six years ago the crack epidemic started infecting OMI, but many residents didn't notice.

"I've lived here 12 years and I never had any trouble until a year and a half ago when these guys started showing up on the corners," said Joan Lewis. "At first, I didn't know what it was until I saw money being exchanged for bags of white stuff."

Two weeks ago, an Examiner reporter stood at the Lewises' front window and observed five transactions where money was exchanged for plastic bags of white material.

Joan Lewis moved to San Francisco from Pacific Grove in Monterey County because she craved The City's openness and tolerance. John Lewis grew up in OMI and attended St. Michael's school, a few blocks away.

For the past year, they have been trying to sell their house, which includes a big art studio, for \$199,000. More than 50 people have come to look; none have stuck around to buy.

"People love the place and they love the price," said real estate agent Judy Rydell. "But the neighborhood scares them to death."

Rydell recalled a time she was approaching the Lewis home with a prospective buyer in her car.

"The car up ahead of me stopped at a stop sign. I guess they were trying to buy drugs from the guys on the corner. Suddenly, the guys started attacking that car, trying to smash the windows and dragging the driver out. I thought, 'Oh, God, are we going to see a murder?'"

Lewis has pretty much given up on the idea of selling her home. "Our only hope is getting this neighborhood cleaned up," she said. She's organized a block club, attends OMI Neighbors in Action

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"If it hadn't happened late, he might have been killed," said Minnie Ward. As it was, the boy was asleep in a back bedroom instead of

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