



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

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Columnist

Can I get a witness?

With all due respect to Sgt. Bailey and the Deschutes County Sheriff's Office, whose service and dedication to professionalism are both real and deeply appreciated by this space, the advice to citizens to stand back and "be a good witness" in the face of crime is ultimately damaging to a community.

The "be a good witness" meme has been all the rage in law enforcement circles for several decades, and there are some solid reasons for it. Overzealous citizens who don't understand the law, or their rights and duties, have caused serious problems for law enforcement, and occasionally themselves. They have been shot, mistakenly arrested, beaten up by suspects, murdered by suspects, and sometimes take action when there is, in fact, no crime.

The specter of civil and criminal liability for addressing any crime is real, and potentially devastating for both citizens and law enforcement professionals alike.

All of those are solid reasons to sit back and be a good witness, and it is the same advice that many departments give to off-duty officers who find themselves in a position to intercede or prevent crimes in progress. Nothing is worse — and it has happened more than once — than when arriving officers shoot an off-duty officer because he was carrying a gun in civilian clothes and failed to properly identify himself.

But the "good witness" premise is flawed on a number of levels. The first of those is the implicit embrace of the nanny-state, which encourages weakness in law-abiding citizens by causing them to fear virtually everything, and particularly the right and responsibility to confront our nation's growing multitude of utter scumbags.

The flipside is that criminals, particularly those packs of malicious young criminals and mischief-makers who have yet to be sufficiently thumped by life — and generally have little or no respect for much of anything — are emboldened to deviance every time law-abiding citizens walk away, or make the very funny threat (usually while showing them

their cell-phone) to call the cops.

Turning everything over to the government also adds to the erosion of our rights as free citizens. As a citizen you have the legal right to detain someone suspected of a crime. You have the right to do that using the same use of force continuum that law enforcement does. But for years citizens have been asked to dumb themselves down, act like sheep, and let criminals run over the top of them while waiting to be rescued.

There are actually people in this country who would like you to allow criminals into your house to steal your stuff and abuse your loved ones while you hide in a cry-closet frantically dialing 911.

No, thanks.

Being a good witness really boils down to some essential ingredients, which a surprising number of adults are incapable of cooking with, particularly when talking to a dispatcher under conditions approaching stress.

First, is what you are seeing actually a crime? Some knowledge of the law — which many people think they have and actually don't — is probably important. Second, get a description of the suspect — what are they

wearing, how old are they, are they white, black, Asian, Hispanic? That isn't profiling, by the way, it's being a "good witness," and details matter. Which direction are they travelling? Are they on foot, a bicycle, or driving a car? What does the vehicle look like? Can you read the plate? Even a partial plate number can be helpful. And after all of that good witnessing, please stand around sucking your thumb until a deputy arrives, by which time everything will probably be over.

Insisting that citizens yield their rights, and one of the feature responsibilities of being an adult — involvement in the protection of their community — to merely witnessing crime is absurd. The "don't approach, don't engage or get involved" advice is fine for children, but not for adults. That is precisely how criminals and mischief-makers take over a neighborhood, then a town, and eventually a criminal justice system. And that's particularly true in a town like ours, which is severely under-patrolled, particularly during the summer months when hordes of people descend on Sisters from who-knows-where.

The dearth of patrols in our city — and a rapidly

growing city means rapidly growing criminal behavior — is likely a staffing issue, and isn't entirely the Sheriff's fault. Sheriff Nelson would, beyond a doubt, love to throw a ton of deputies at Sisters' burgeoning criminal problems, and no law enforcement officer worth the weight of their badge wants their beat to suffer any crime at all, let alone a spree committed by a small number of delinquents.

In law enforcement, as in the rest of life, squeaky wheels always get the grease, and if the people in this town want more patrols, they better start squawking and wobbling — loudly and frequently — like the bad wheel on a shopping cart. They should probably demand that the City Council pony up some more money to get full-time deputies here, particularly through the peak tourism months.

Citizens of this town, or any other, who are serious about preventing crime should also attend a citizen's academy, learn something about the law, their rights and responsibilities, and make their own choice between merely witnessing, or taking meaningful, responsible action to deter, interrupt, or prevent criminal behavior in our community.

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Saturday, August 31, 9 a.m.-1 p.m.
Sisters Recycling Center
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- Pool & spa chemicals
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- Aerosols
- Mercury items
- Fluorescent light bulbs/tubes
- Oil filters & antifreeze
- Paints & stains
- Cleaning products & poisons
- Automotive chemicals
- Propane tanks

Items NOT accepted: BUSINESS-GENERATED HAZARDOUS WASTE, explosives, fireworks, ammunition, gas cylinders, radioactive and medical waste.

Deschutes County encourages persons with disabilities to participate in all programs and activities. This event/location is accessible to people with disabilities. If you need accommodations to make participation possible, or to request this information in an alternate format please contact:

Deschutes County Department of Solid Waste
(541) 317-3163 www.deschutes.org/sw