

# ONE VICTIM'S 'WAKEUP CALL' PRODUCES A RECONCILIATION

By Kay Harvey Staff Writer

Darrol Bussler pulls open the door of his South St. Paul home, flips on a light and feels the momentary jolt of relief.

"There's almost always that flash of realization that no one has broken in," he says. Etched in his memory is the scene he encountered a year and a half ago, when he arrived home to find his house strewn with broken glass and his stereo smashed. Picture frames, dishes, light fixtures and a computer screen were shattered: The cabinet that once held a television and VCR sat empty.

Upstairs, his bed linens were drenched with lemon juice, and the mirror on his

Bussler took the call in an upstairs bedroom. Police on the other end said they had arrested two teen-agers in a break-in and vandalism at Darrol Bussler's home.

As he talked on the phone, Bussler sat looking at a broken mirror, part of the damage the teen-agers left behind.

For Bussler, the splintered glass became a symbol that inspired him to write this poem, title "Reflection":

Take a look at this piece.  
What do you see?  
A broken mirror:  
That's easy to see.  
Take a look at this piece.  
What do you see?  
Our culture?  
That may well be.  
Take a look at this piece.  
What will we do?  
Will our actions reflect  
What we need to renew?

dressing table - part of an antique bedroom set that had been his parents' - was a montage of long, pointed shards.

Within 20 hours, two teens from his neighborhood were arrested.

Bussler, a Mankato State University education professor, was a victim of crime. But amid \$16,000 worth of chaos, he saw something else, too. He recognized his role in the creation and repair of a crime-torn community.

"The break-in was a wakeup call. It awakened me to my own value system. I asked myself, 'What am I doing to revitalize my neighborhood?' I realized I wasn't doing anything. I just came home each night and slept."

Once an "Iowa farm boy," he brought a neighborly mentality with him to his South St. Paul home. The year he moved in, he threw a neighborhood Christmas party. That was 1977, when residents held annual block parties. Then the parties stopped.

"And I got busy," he said. "So busy I stopped talking to people. As I look back, I see myself moving from privacy to privatization."

Now, he wanted to talk. He asked to meet the juveniles who broke in and burglarized his home. With the help of a mediator in Dakota County's restorative justice program, he spoke with his teenage neighbors for the first time.

Bussler had an idea that he hoped might help rekindle a spirit of neighborliness. "I want you to meet your community," he told the boys.

He proposed a neighborhood dinner at his home. He would buy the food. The



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boys would cook it. They would hand deliver an invitation to each neighbor's door.

The gathering came off without a hitch. Thirty neighbors showed up to eat homemade chili, fruit and desserts the boys prepared. "Not one of them knew everyone on their block," Bussler said of his neighbors.

Some surprising things happened. When he gave one of the teens cash to buy plastic utensils, the boy picked up supplies at his own home and returned the cash. He told Bussler he wanted to save him the money. The other boy eagerly mopped up a small spill on Bussler's kitchen counter. He didn't want to leave a mess, he said.

Since then, others in the neighborhood have organized a block party, and residents have revived a block club. They are important steps, Bussler said, in strengthening the community.

"What those boys did points out what we are allowing to happen to us. We can do something other than buying bigger fences and bigger locks. Hatred cannot be met with hatred. It has to be met with love. It takes a community to raise a child. We're all part of a community. We all need to be responsible for it."

South St. Paul resident Darrol Bussler holds a piece of his parents' 1930s dresser mirror, broken in April 1994 when two neighborhood teen-agers vandalized his home. Bussler arranged for the teens to cook a meal for neighborhood residents as part of a unique Dakota County restorative justice program.

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