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Edgewater loitering: Neighborhood seeks to counteract gangs with special nights along Thorndale Avenue at the 'L' stop

July 29, 2009 | By Mary Owen, SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

On a typical evening in Edgewater, dozens of young men linger along the sidewalks of Thorndale Avenue near the elevated train stop. Their presence is intimidating, say many in the community, and sometimes there is drug dealing and theft.

But on Monday evenings, the scene changes. Sidewalks fill with children playing board games and adults engaged in cards and chatting over grape leaves, courtesy of local Iraqi refugees.

The organized gatherings -- called Neighborhood Nights -- take aim at a more than 40-year history of gang activity along the business district in the 1100 block of West Thorndale Avenue. The strip has a shoe repair shop, dry cleaner, video store, coin laundry, liquor store and two family-owned restaurants. "It's no coincidence that we chose Thorndale," said Dan Kleinman, housing director of the Edgewater Community Council, which sponsors Neighborhood Nights. "If you can fill Thorndale with an ongoing effort, it starts to become a more enjoyable place."

The weekly events seek to create a community feel in the North Side neighborhood, which is one of the city's most ethnically diverse and densely populated.

But some business owners are skeptical that a weekly two-hour event can change the personality of the street.

"There's still a lot of [youths]," said Maria Brito, whose family owns Lake Breeze Restaurant under the Thorndale Red Line "L" stop just east of Broadway. "These boys are on every corner no matter what they do. Even if they leave [during Neighborhood Nights] they come back right away."

On a typical Monday between 6 and 8 p.m., anywhere from 30 to 100 children and adults show up to enjoy the games -- such as Ninja Versus Ninja and Stratego -- that employees from Chicagoland Games supply. Some of the young men who hang out on the streets occasionally even participate.

During one event, Kleinman said, a reputed gang member tried to make trouble, but his peers told him it was not an appropriate place.

Residents said they appreciate having a family-oriented event.

"It's a very good thing," said longtime Edgewater resident James Banks, who brought his 10-year-old grandson and both his 7- and 9-year-old sons on a recent evening. "We'd come every day if we could."

Ald. Mary Ann Smith (48th) praised Neighborhood Nights as "positive loitering."

"Every time you have a void of positive activity, you nurture negative activity," said Smith, who was first elected 20 years ago.