

Thou Shalt Not Covet Thy Neighbor's Dodge Caravan

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Cover story I wrote for the Nov. 17, 2006 edition of the Washington City Paper, DC's alternative weekly. Lots of street-level action of my activism combating the spike in stolen auto joyriding in Kenilworth 2003 - 2006, with parallels to my father's experience in Kenilworth.

WASHINGTON CITY PAPER, COVER STORY Nov. 17, 2006

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What's the son of an Amish-Mennonite reverend doing in Kenilworth Courts? Going after kiddie car thieves.

"White, snitchin', motherfuckin' bitch," the teen in the passenger seat yelled. I just smiled and chortled.

By Joe Lapp

Illustrations by Greg Houston

The Rev. Lapp wakes up. An hour ago his wife took off her prayer bonnet, slid the hairpins out of the bun on the back of her head, and lay down beside him. Now he hears chains jangling—some neighborhood youth playing on the swing set in the backyard playground.

With farm-honed mechanical ingenuity, he and other Fellowship Haven church workers installed the tall swing set, the sliding board, the tetherball pole, and the basketball hoop, providing a recreation area for the kids in this “project” neighborhood when the city would not. And with typical no-nonsense, Amish-Mennonite, Bible-coached discipline, he let the children of Kenilworth know the playground was off-limits after dark. Now some teenagers are disturbing his family’s sleep and violating the hours that he, Elmer Lapp, had set.

It’s been only a couple of years since the August 1965 day when he moved his family from their rural Pennsylvania home to the D.C. “hood, but he’s pretty sure he knows almost all the kids that live close by, at least by sight. He knows their mothers, too, knocking on their doors to say hello and reassure them that their children are safe on the playground and in the weekly Bible classes he and other volunteers teach.

Elmer gets out of bed and dresses. He slips out the back door intent on identifying the swing-set scofflaws. The teenagers spot him as he enters the playground through a chain-link gate. They yell and run. He hoofs it after them through a back alley and over onto Ponds Street, into the heart of the Kenilworth Courts complex, where he gets close enough to confirm the identity of at least one. He doesn’t really want to catch them, of course.

He turns toward home. Two young men approach. As they pass, one reaches over and punches him in the stomach. The punch hits hard enough to make the reverend, already winded, bend over and gasp for air. The young men make their getaway. Recovered enough to continue walking, Elmer sees good neighbor Leroy out in his yard. “I just got my first sock in the chest,” Elmer tells him. Leroy’s reply isn’t direct, but its subtext is clear: Well, you’re a white man out on the streets of Kenilworth after dark. What do you expect?

The reverend continues home and crawls back into bed. The next day church workers don’t need to hear from Elmer about his mishap the night before—the playground is already alive with the news. They hear a phrase

buzzing around, something about "Don't mess with the Bible man." Neighborhood kids fill them in—that the teen who dared to hit Mr. Lapp was shot and killed later that night in a seemingly random act of violence up on busy Kenilworth Avenue, not more than two blocks from the scene of the punch.

"Don't mess with the preacher; God's got his back," the community decides. In a culture already superstitiously protective of its preacher-men, Elmer Lapp—my father—becomes an instant legend, and no one dares touch him after that.

But as I stand on a Douglas Street sidewalk on the third night of the new year of 2004, about to suffer in my own way for my own cause, I am in the midst of a new generation that, for the most part, doesn't know Elmer and doesn't fear the wrath of God for touching me. And when that teenage fist crashes into my jaw under a mulberry tree, just across from the narrow brick house that I came home to as a newborn, I know that, though I am becoming a martyr in the tradition my father set out, no one will die tonight, though I realize afresh just how fragile white skin can be. I am the last Lapp on Douglas Street.

Elmer and Fannie Lapp left Kenilworth and retired to Lancaster County, Pa., their childhood home, in 2001. But I wasn't done there. In February 2003, I returned to this three-block-square community in the small corner of Northeast that is east of the Anacostia River. I holed up in the basement of one of the four houses that my family has lived in on Douglas Street, one that the Fellowship Haven church group still owns. Settling in, I slipped back into my tuxedo-wearing, serving-food-to-rich-people catering job and set out to rediscover the community.

My neighbor Rita was the first to tell me about the juvenile-car-theft problem. She hailed me as I walked between the Deanwood Metro station and my house, asking me about my parents. I asked her what was going on in the neighborhood these days. She replied that it was going downhill, that kids were stealing cars and driving them around recklessly. I almost scoffed at her story of finding some preteens trying to steal a car parked in front of her house, but within a week, I had seen enough myself to become a believer.

Though it was early spring 2003 when I realized how bad the auto-theft problem had become, it wasn't until May, when my childhood friend Theadousia "Dosha" White was shot and killed in Kenilworth, that I realized I could remain distant no longer. My neighborhood was in bad shape and crying for attention, and I realized that if I was to do anything about it, if I was to be at all my father's son, I'd better get out of my basement and hit the streets.

Douglas Street is wide and about three blocks long, cut off at one end by the Kenilworth Avenue highway and at the other by parkland. It has little traffic and few cars parked at its curbs. Because of this, it became a popular place for joy-riding teenagers to do their thing, and their thing was to put stolen cars through as many acrobatics as the vehicles, usually late-model Dodges, could manage. They'd do doughnuts in the intersection of Douglas and Anacostia Avenue. They'd drag race down the street two abreast. Some tried to perfect the movie stunt where you reverse at high speed then swing the car halfway around and peel out.

It didn't help that nearby Kenilworth Courts—a 400-plus-unit, government-built, low-income housing complex—though overwhelmingly populated by law-abiding citizens, happened to house a number of these young thieves and their friends. At first I was puzzled by the high number of stolen Dodge Caravans I saw, but I quickly learned that the minivans were easy to steal. And they had plenty of room to pack in your friends for a little weekend fun around town.

Stealing cars became so commonplace to a few kids that it appeared as though they were treating the easy-to-steal Dodge line as a kind of poor man's car-sharing service. It wasn't hard to imagine them stealing a two-door Dodge Neon from around the Deanwood Metro station, for instance, and driving it to, say, a movie out in Prince George's County. There they'd meet up with a few friends and need a bigger ride, grabbing a Caravan or a good-looking Jeep Cherokee from the parking lot for transport home. And when John "John-John" Johnson got killed up in Benning Terrace on June 15, 2003, while playing a game of pedestrian-versus-stolen-van chicken, some of his friends used a stolen auto to get to his funeral.

"Kiddie car thieves," the press would dub them. I just called them "the UU kids," after UUV, a police designation that stands for "Unauthorized Use of a Vehicle" and that the teens themselves used as a label for their illegal activities. Though they were usually between the ages of 13 and 16, I remember meeting one police officer who said that in Benning Terrace he found two 8- or 9-year-olds driving a stolen car. One of them sat on phone books and steered while the other crouched down and worked the pedals. It was like something out of a movie, fast turning from comedy into horror.

Screeching tires woke me up while I slept in after evening catering gigs. I walked home from the Metro at night to the smell of hot rubber and burning transmissions. Sometimes my bedtime lullaby was the distinctive thumps of a disintegrating tire, worn from hard use, slapping long rubber tendrils against car and pavement as it tore itself apart.

Outrageous stories and damage reports began to accrue. The stop sign by my corner got knocked down as fast as the city could put up a new one. Misdirected cars bowled over sidewalk cherry trees. More neighbors than I can remember had their parked cars plowed into, some three or four times. An elderly man had to scramble over a fence to avoid a speeding car in the alley behind his house.

Once a Dodge pickup with a bed full of teenagers from a rival community rode through the streets of Kenilworth, chased by police. The teens taunted us as they passed, then sped the wrong way down a one-way street. One night, the sight of a passing police car drove two thieves to pull into my driveway. When fences hemmed them in, they slammed into the back of my neighbor's home and ran.

The stolen-car thing simply made me mad—that here were a bunch of kids who ought to know better ruining other people’s cars and, in turn, ruining their own lives as well. I decided to take UUV on as “my issue.” I figured I could do my neighborhood some good while also learning about community organizing and political life in the city.

I began to attend community meetings. It soon became clear that the UUV problem was bigger than just my neighborhood. As I talked to community leaders, they all seemed to say the same thing—get the ear of the D.C. Council. And to do that, they said, you’ve got to get out there and make some noise. So I made some noise.

I made phone calls to reporters, councilmembers, local activists, and TV stations. I bought a fax machine and sent the same folks faxes. I e-mailed letters to D.C. congressional Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton and to Michael Kelly, the head of the D.C. Housing Authority. I made small cards explaining the issue and put them on vehicles in random neighborhoods, especially those “up there in Northwest” where, by local tradition, all the rich and powerful lived and where they had no problems at all, at least not compared to ours. One day I even made a big sign and sat down on the steps of the John A. Wilson Building, talking to whomever stopped long enough to look at me.

Through many people’s efforts, D.C. police Chief Charles H. Ramsey, the council, even the mayor began to pay attention to the UUV problem. After a while, though, I started to get disillusioned with the whole political thing. First of all, I was a novice, and I was pretty quickly in over my head. I’m a blue-jeans-and-T-shirt kind of guy, and there I was walking around city hall in a suit and tie, trying to be a lobbyist.

And second, I began to sense that no one wanted to address the root issues of the problem. All the council talked about was a few quick legislative fixes to the juvenile-justice system. What about more money for schools and recreation, I wondered? What about actually paying attention to the thousands of residents who live in the stuffy confines of public-housing complexes all over the city? What about trying to address the economic and racial inequities that have pushed another generation of black teens toward crime? What about a real overhaul of the city’s broken juvenile-justice system, and what about instituting long-awaited reforms at Oak Hill, the city’s juvenile-detention center?

Frustrated with the political approach, I hit the streets of Kenilworth, befriending neighborhood kids and confronting and discouraging illegal activity when I could. While I was growing up, Fellowship Haven’s male volunteers had fixed bicycle tires for the community’s children, and I decided to restart the service. I took every opportunity to say that I didn’t think stealing cars was right, and I started openly calling the police on my cell phone when I saw a stolen car. I even put up anti-UUV posters around the neighborhood after John-John died in Benning Terrace and his name appeared in R.I.P. graffiti in the neighborhood.

I became adept at spotting parked UUVs—by their make, by the weird places they were stashed, by the missing ignition core that signaled the car had been effectively hot-wired. At first I thought if I just stood by such a vehicle, “protecting” it until the police came, that it would be enough to deter these kids from coming back. But my first attempt to implement this plan ended badly, with me fearing for my life and the police telling me to go home and leave the street work to them. As it turned out, the kids did come back and didn’t really care that I was there; they

drove that van all they wanted. They even taunted me. At one point, one of them stood beside my bewildered self in the street and said, "Race you to the van," before running off, laughing, then hopping in and peeling off.

So I became a vigilante of sorts. As I figured out who some of the main UUV culprits were, I began to learn their names and where they lived. I started to use my camera as a weapon and tried—sometimes surreptitiously, sometimes boldly—to take pictures of them in and around stolen vehicles. Certain teens took to pulling their T-shirts over their faces and yelling at me to get away from them whenever I'd walk past.

And I developed the sport of UU hunting. I'd wait till it was dark, throw on some black clothes, grab my cell phone, and go to work. When I found a stolen car, I'd creep up to it and let the air out of a tire to discourage them from driving it away again, then I'd call in the tags to the police. It wasn't unusual, at least at first, for an operator to get testy with me, wondering how, if it wasn't my car, I knew it was stolen. I learned to get testy back and tell them if they saw a Dodge Stratus parked in an unusual spot in their neighborhood with a jimmed door lock and a missing ignition, wouldn't they think it was stolen, too?

I also learned that, if the license plate was not listed as stolen in the police database, they would probably do nothing about it. So I began to contact the owners myself, rummaging through the car to find a name and number, then calling it and asking, Are you the owner of a stolen such-and-such? It was a rush to go out hunting, an activity given a bit more spice as the kids figured out what I was doing and as reports started to come in of these teenagers carrying guns, even semiautomatic weapons.

But even with that fear, I knew I couldn't abandon the personal approach. For one thing, I still had to walk up and down my street on a regular basis to get to the Metro and get to work, and I wanted to be able to do so safely. I also knew from seeing my father and other church folk at work in the community that mixing strictness with love really does work.

So I made sure to engage these kids in conversation when I saw them. I talked to them on the street as they hung out late at night. I confronted them in the Metro when I heard them bragging about their UUV exploits and how they ran from the police. I even knocked on their doors sometimes to try to explain to them why I was combating what was, to them, fun and games.

Of course my tactics didn't often score me popularity points. I got called "snitch" a lot. One day in Kenilworth, I picked up an unlikely bulletin. It was a crudely designed poster printed on orange paper with the headline "Snitch Report." The body of the poster, as I recall, said something like, "Richard Bree is a yellow-ass snitch. Tall with nappy dreads and a mama's boy look, if you see him stay away…" It became

clear that snitching was no little thing, often considered worse than the crime itself. As snitch, to some of the neighborhood's teens I became a despised figure who could not be trusted.

Once a stolen late-model Jeep SUV came rolling down Douglas Street at night just as I was getting ready for a bike ride. I decided to have a little fun with it. Hopping on my bike, I raced down the small hill in my front yard toward the vehicle, surprising the driver and his passengers as I pulled alongside them when they slowed down for the stop sign by my house.

The teen in the passenger seat, who I'd come to know by face and name, thought about pulling his T-shirt up to hide his face, but instead just started cussing at me. "Motherfuckin' bitch. White, snitchin', motherfuckin' bitch," he yelled. "I could jack you up." I just smiled and chortled, happy to have taken them by surprise for once.

And the logic I tried to use didn't always get through, either. Once I played some basketball at the local recreation center with a few kids, and afterward one of them told me that the stolen brown convertible I had seen earlier in the day was "his."

I took a reasoning tack. "Someone worked hard for that car," I said. "How would you feel if someone took something of yours?"

"I'd fuck 'em up," the teen said.

"Well, then you should understand that people wouldn't want you messing with their property," I countered. "Someone needs that car to get to work, and it's not there for them."

"Oh, it's OK," he said. "We took that car from way out in Virginia."

Once I baked cookies and took a bunch out in the neighborhood to give to the UU kids, a sort of peace offering. When I found a group of them sitting on a front porch, some of them sat there and ate what I offered. Some of them tossed their cookie in a high arc over the telephone wires to land not far from the front of the church house that my father had built.

One night, as stolen cars raced up and down Douglas Street, I came up from my basement determined to walk up to where the UU kids hung out, just where Kenilworth Courts fronts onto Douglas Street and just where my father's church stands. I figured I would insert myself into the mix, perhaps to try to calm things, or find out some information, or just be a positive presence representing a "No" to the lawlessness that was ruling my street.

Some of my childhood friends had gathered in front of my house, however. Their expensive SUVs were stopped next to one another in that long Douglas Street tradition of double parking to shoot the breeze. It's a declaration that the street is an extension of our front yards, and if you don't like it, well then, just go around us.

And go around us the UU vans did, slowing down enough to squeeze through without incident before accelerating up the street. The UU kids do respect muscled men and flashy cars, and they didn't want to risk an accident. I took a picture of one of the vans as they passed by, full of teens, aiming the flash at the driver's face, earning a loud "Fuck you!" from inside.

I began my journey up the street toward where I could see the UU kids in their usual hangout spot. I was soon stopped short by a loud crash. The whole street was suddenly still. Then a van put down rubber as a teen ran up the street swinging a T-shirt and shouting, "He wrecked it! He wrecked it!"

My first thought was that the kids had indeed scraped my friend's SUV with one of their stolen cars, and that I'd better get back down there before a kid got throttled. But when I got there, what I saw instead was a station wagon crashed headlong into my neighbor's brick retaining wall. Whoever had been inside it was long gone. The police showed up after a while, and we all stood around speculating and trading stories.

Then, pulled by my good-citizen's compulsion, I started up the street again toward the tree and the milling

teenagers. "You're crazy," my friends called after me. "You'll get yourself killed."

"Well, if you hear the shots, come rescue me," I threw back over my shoulder.

As I got closer to the center of action, it was clear there were more kids hanging out than usual—in the street, on the sidewalk, on the porches lining the nearby court. It was party central on Douglas Street, kids milling, stolen cars rolling, and music blaring in a scene unlike any the usually quiet street had seen before. I saw a couple of younger kids that I knew, whose bikes I fixed now and again, and decided to go lean on the fence beside them at the edge of the crowd.

I was heading that way when, out of nowhere, I got knocked down. I had only a quick corner-of-my-eye glimpse of a stocky kid in a white T-shirt before his fist crashed into my lower jaw. He threw the blow from behind and without warning, a violation of all the spoken and unspoken codes of misconduct that I'm familiar with. The blow knocked me down, and I got back up as quick as I could, the world suddenly changed and menacing.

The next attack came from a tall teen with a white T-shirt wrapped loosely around his neck and upper torso, whom I had seen earlier faking being hit by one of the stolen cars. He lowered his shoulder and charged, knocking me into the dirt again alongside the sprawling roots of a mulberry tree.

I got up again to face a street suddenly quiet for the second time that night. Kids paused and stared at me from where they leaned on fences, or lounged on the hoods of parked cars, or sat on porches, waiting to see what would happen next. As no more attacks came, and through the dull aching in my jaw, I slowly realized that here I had a captive audience, if only I could seize the moment. So I did what the son of a pacifist pastor would do at such a moment. I preached. I preached about love and forgiveness. I preached about respecting the law and the community and not tearing it down.

Then I said, "And now I'm going to stand here and hold my hand out, and I want the men who hit me, if they are man enough, to come and shake it, and I will forgive them." A ripple ran through the audience, and everybody started glancing around. Finally, a teen who I thought resembled the one who had knocked me down the second time stood up from where he leaned on a car, came over, and shook my hand. "I forgive you," I said. He thug-hugged me.

There was no sign of the body that belonged to the fist that had crashed into my jaw.

By that time, everyone had resumed talking and going about his business. At some point, a police cruiser rushed up the street from where officers were taking down a report on the car that crashed into my neighbor's wall. And one of the mothers who lived close by came and took my arm. "Mr. Lapp," she said, "we all know you're a peace-loving man, and you can probably tell I've had a little too much to drink tonight, but these kids are out of control. Please go home." So I did.

Through the slow fear that came as the adrenaline of the encounter wore off, I wondered what to do next. I knew the police couldn't solve everything, and besides, my father and the church had a long history of dealing with problems in-house as much as possible. I filed a report but did not press charges.

If you wait a few days in a place like Kenilworth Courts, word usually gets around about who did what. After a few discreet inquiries, I indeed did learn who hit me; the young man eventually called me to apologize. Apparently it was his car that had crashed into my neighbor's wall that night. He said he had seen me down there while the police were taking their report and assumed I was snitching (his car had fake tags), and that's why he hit me.

The neighborhood has a history of looking out for my family. While there had to have been some suspicion about these white folks moving into the community, I find no one these days who will readily admit to such thoughts. It seems that most Kenilworth Courts and Douglas Street residents figured out that my parents wanted to be an asset to the neighborhood, and so they were accepted as a part of community life.

By the time fall 1968 rolled around, and the rioting came to D.C. after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, neighbors were begging my family to stay with them for a few nights until things calmed down. It was not that anyone feared harm for my family from the people of Kenilworth. Rather, they feared what a band of people from outside the neighborhood, riding through, might do to these white folks they would suddenly come across in the middle of a black neighborhood.

On the night I got knocked down, and in subsequent days, the neighborhood protected me, too. A one-time Fellowship Haven church member was watching from an upper-story window in the house across the street when I got hit, that narrow brick house that I came home to when I was born. He called the police, causing that squad car to come racing up to catch the tail end of my sermon. ("They hittin' that white boy out there," the one-time church member later told me he said to the 911 operator. "We don't care about that," the operator reportedly said. "Well, if they kill that white boy, it's going to be on you," the neighbor replied.)

I got some more intelligence when I happened to get on the same Metro car as Reggie Glover, who grew up in Kenilworth. He told me that he and others had come down hard on the kids after the incident. "We weren't home that night," he said, "or we would have been out there knocking heads together right then. But we spread the word afterward, "Don't you touch that man." It's not right what those kids did to you, after all your family's done for this neighborhood."

Mr. Cooper came to check on me as soon as he heard what had happened. He lived in Kenilworth Courts, and he opposed the UU kids just as much as I. It was not unusual to see him in his old-time brown luxury van tearing around the neighborhood after some stolen car or other, letting them know they weren't wanted on Douglas Street. It was he who had taught me to look in the cars for the owner's information and call them myself, he who inspired my string of vigilante activities.

Even the UU kids grew to respect me in some measure after this incident, perhaps when they realized that I wasn't going to just disappear after a little adversity came along. I began to get comments like, "Joe Lapps, the only white man not afraid to live out here," mixed in with the still-occasional yells of "Snitch!" and teens sometimes edging away from me saying, "You hot" (as in, "You're in league with the police"). And when I stopped to talk to a group of neighbors out on their porch late one night and told them someone had just thrown a bottle at me, one teen had this reaction: "What?! Man, I find them I be shootin' & "em. Nobody mess with Joe Lapps. That's a Kenilworth-walkin' Bible man."

But ultimately, the UUV culture in Kenilworth proved too complex to yield to my efforts. Take the story of D., a young man who I tried hard to engage one-on-one. When I first met D., he was a gangly preteen trying to navigate the contradictory messages he was receiving from his mother and his friends on the streets, all the while facing the oncoming tide of adolescence. When last I saw him, only a few months ago, he was a burly teenager with a hard look in his eyes and a flat timbre to his voice.

My first encounter with D. came in May 2003, when I found him crying outside his Kenilworth Courts town house, locked out by his mother because he had come home past his curfew. As the UUV crisis heated up, I began to hear that he was one of the ringleaders for the kids who stole cars, though I could never get first-hand confirmation of that.

He disappeared a few months later. His mother informed me that he was in Oak Hill, that dreaded place, for auto theft. He came home after about six months, and I hoped he had reformed. One night, however, police chased a stolen car through the neighborhood. It crashed on Ponds Street, and D. was arrested again that night. I didn't see him for a long time. Having read in the papers that the UU kids were graduating to armed carjacking, which carries a much stronger penalty than run-of-the-mill auto theft, I assumed there was a good chance that the car was stolen at gunpoint and that D. might be in one form of juvenile detention or another until his status as a minor expires.

D. came home recently for a holiday weekend, and I spoke to him on his front porch. His answers to my questions were short; he did not meet my gaze. Though I didn't want to, I found myself suspecting it was no coincidence that, while I had lately seen few stolen cars tearing through the neighborhood, one ended up wrecked on the sidewalk in front of a neighbor's house the weekend he was home.CP

Joe Lapp currently resides in Islamabad, Pakistan. He is working on a book about his family's experiences in Kenilworth. For a free download of his recently published booklet on Kenilworth neighborhood history, or to contact him, visit his Web site, lappjoe.com. The "Out of Kenilworth" oral history project, conducted by the author, outlines the history of the Fellowship Haven Church in Kenilworth. This collection of interviews, along with background documentation about the church and neighborhood, is available to the public in the Washingtoniana Room of the Martin Luther King Jr. Public Library in downtown Washington, D.C.