

Teens Charged in Multiple Graffiti-Related Vandalisms at County Schools

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Charles County Sheriff Rex W. Coffey said a tip to the Charles County School Crime Solvers program and good police work, including the use of computer forensics, led to the identity of two suspects involved in six graffiti-related vandalisms at three county schools.

"To some, graffiti might seem harmless. To us, graffiti is costly and in this case, created disruption at some schools. We don't tolerate that type of behavior here in the county and the work done to solve these crimes shows that we will track every lead down until we identify the suspects," said Sheriff Coffey.

Joshua Purnell, 19, of Waldorf, was arrested on January 21 and Joseph Rovnak, 19, of Fort Washington, was arrested on January 27 after sheriff's officers assigned to the School Resource Unit linked them to the vandalisms.

The vandalisms occurred in November and December at Westlake High School, North Point High School and Wade Elementary School. In each case either "cartoon-like figures" or "small bombs" were spray painted on the outside walls of the schools. The word "Otaku" – Japanese meaning "people with obsessive interests particularly anime, manga, or video games" – was included in each painting.

In one case - the only case Rovank was involved in - a large plume cloud depicting an explosion accompanied by the date "1-11-11" was spray painted on a wall at North Point High School on December 5, 2010. The symbol and the date frightened some people and created disruption for students, staff and parents who feared a possible attack would occur on January 11, 2011. Although nothing unusual happened that day, officers did monitor the situation.

A break in the case came when officers received a tip through the Charles County Student Crime Solvers program – a program in which students can give tips about crime to officers or school administrators but remain anonymous. The tip in this case included the name of a possible suspect. Officers C. Cusmano, J. Cooney, P. Anderson and Sgt. M. Vaughn, tracked down the lead using computer forensics and were able to positively identify the suspects.

Purnell was charged with destruction of property and trespassing. Rovnak was charged with one count of destruction of property and trespassing. Because evidence showed both suspects knew the picture of the plume cloud would create fear and cause disruption throughout the school system, the suspects were also charged with threats of arson - a misdemeanor crime in which they could receive up to 10 years in jail or a \$10,000 fine or both. Absenteeism in some schools that day was up to 25 percent.

Cpl. Don Kabala, a school resource officer and the sheriff's office coordinator of the Student Crime Solvers program, said since the program's inception in 2007, over 1,557 tips have been received, 400 cases have been solved and nearly \$17,000 has been paid out in reward money. Vince Laake, president of the Charles County Crime Solvers Board of Directors and Betty Turner, a Crime Solvers board member said the school program works. "Our program is so successful that other police departments in the region have taken note and initiated similar programs," said Turner.

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