

# *It's All in the Cause*



## *Taking a Bite Out of Local Crime*

### **Yozette “Yogi” Collins**

Safety and a low crime rate are vital to the success of any community and the watchful eyes of community members are important tools toward that end. Crime Stoppers, a nationwide community program that provides a way for citizens to anonymously report criminal activity, is a natural extension of that goal.

Because Crime Stoppers falls under local police or sheriff’s departments, it may surprise readers to learn that, while it receives tax dollars to be used solely for administrative work, the organization is classified as a non-profit one. Any rewards offered must come from private sources via (tax deductible) donations or fundraisers.

When Troy Cook of the Avery County Sheriff’s Department wanted to start a Crime Stoppers program there, he spoke with Len Hagaman III, coordinator of the Watauga group. “[Watauga County Crime Stoppers] invited us to join them,” says Cook, “and the name was changed to High Country Crime Stoppers. We just felt it might be better to join an established program and we’re in the same judicial district. We jumped at the opportunity to do that.”

Watauga County Coordinator Len Hagaman III, an employee of the Boone Police Department, has worked with the 22-year old Watauga program since 2002 and became coordinator in October 2008. He explains that Crime Stoppers legislation aims to keep the organization from any possible issues. For example, while elected officials may sit on the board, Crime Stoppers policy prohibits them from voting lest they be tempted to vote that a friend receive a reward payout.

Personally, I’ve always wondered how anonymous a caller remains. You know those TV crime dramas where police promise anonymity to an informant but then let the cat out of the bag to the criminal? Well, Hagaman clarified the Crime Stoppers process and, rest assured, callers truly do remain anonymous. In fact, there is also legislation specifying how all tips are handled.

“Information comes into the Boone Police Department and the dispatchers are trained to ask certain questions,” says Hagaman. “All they want are the basics. It’s like in the show ‘Dragnet’ when they’d say ‘Just the facts.’ By the time the information gets to me, I have no idea whether it was even a man or a woman that called in the tip,” let alone any other identifying information.



Additionally, when speaking with a dispatcher, the Crime Stoppers phone line is not recorded like some of the other police or sheriff's department phone lines. Callers may give their name to the dispatcher along with their tip if they choose, but many people simply leave the information. The caller is then assigned a unique code number they may use to call back and check on reward eligibility (to receive a reward, the tip must lead to an arrest or to the recovery of property). Callers never need to share their name or phone number.

Even if the caller is unsure whether the information they have is worthwhile, Hagaman and Cook make it clear that they would rather hear it and check it out than not hear it at all. "All of the information received," adds Hagaman, "is put onto a contact sheet and given to the supervisor of the investigation. They do a status check and establish whether or not the tip is unfounded. For example, if you see a lot of traffic going to a house, but it turns out to be grandkids checking on their grandparents, the investigator can check 'unfounded'. Still, it's a reasonable thing to check out and it helps serve the entire community."

So, should you think you have a tip relating to an area crime, feel secure knowing that your tip and your anonymity will be taken seriously. Meanwhile, get out there and support High Country Crime Stoppers and score some great deals by attending this month's Blowing Rock Winterfest Silent Auction and Raffle on Saturday, January 30<sup>th</sup> from 9:00am to 5:00pm in the Blowing Rock School Cafeteria. It's the largest HCCS fundraiser and promises to offer great items from local businesses.

*For crimes in Watauga County, tips may be e-mailed via the Boone Police Department web site at <http://www.townofboone.net/departments/police/index.html> or called in at (828) 268-6959. Avery County tips can be reported by calling (828) 737-0125.*