

RELIGION

Ravenwood church takes steps to counter vandalism

By Barbara Laker

The Ravenwood Church of the Old Religion is one of the most guarded churches in Atlanta.

Ravenwood, a church and school of Wicca in which the elders call themselves witches, is never left unattended. Because of a recent bout with vandalism, two members stand outside the church on guard every evening between about 9 p.m. and 1 a.m. Others stand inside, watching and listening for anything that might harm them, their home and their cars.

"We're so on top of it, we could not leave our property alone for one minute," said the Rev. Candy Norma Lehrman, founder and organizer of the Wiccan congregation and better known as Lady Sinstana. "I don't have that much faith in humankind to leave it alone."

"What happened to the Metropolitan Community Church won't happen here. They'll have a war on their hands," she added. "We stay here all the time."

The Metropolitan Community Church, a homosexual church, was burned last year, and police attributed the fire to arson.

Wicca is a religion of Western Europe that grew up hand in hand with druidism.

Two weeks ago, about 15 juveniles stopped outside Ravenwood on Moreland Avenue near Little Five Points in the middle of the night and started yelling obscenities. They threw rocks and eggs at the house, Lady Sinstana said.

Some of the teenagers were arrested. But a week later, Ravenwood members found rocks sitting on the front porch and some of their cars damaged in the parking lot.

Atlanta police Sgt. R.T. Shaw said Ravenwood is being vandalized "probably just for kicks. I don't think the vandals are organized against that one group." But police are patrolling the area near the church more carefully since the vandalism occurred, he said.

Lady Sinstana said she does not feel any enmity toward the people who have destroyed the church's property. Wiccan, she said, don't believe in hate or the devil. "There is ignorance and love," she said. "No hate. Hate is only fear, intolerance and ignorance."

She said she only wants to shield Ravenwood from danger and five people living at the church didn't offer enough protection. The church needed members to stand on guard.

She also plans to erect a sign in the front yard that will read, "All those that would desecrate this place of worship will be persecuted to the full extent of Georgia law."

And she is trying to get the city's permission for a church name sign. "If young people don't respect anything else, they may learn to respect signs," she said.

The Wiccans have lived with vandalism since Lady Sinstana started the church in 1976. Five years ago, eight men in three pick-up trucks drove up to Ravenwood with sawed-off shotguns and three Doberman pinchers. Lady Sinstana said they were preparing to pour gasoline around the house.

She remembers telling the male members of the church to lie on the floor while she and two other women, who all happened to be wearing white nightgowns, walked outside with bows and arrows. The men left.

In other incidents, smoke bombs have been thrown into the house and



"What happened to the Metropolitan Community Church won't happen here. They'll have a war on their hands," says Lady Sinstana, whose Ravenwood Church of the Old Religion has taken measures to cut down on vandalism aimed at the church. (Photo - Calvin Cruce)

several windows have been broken. About a year and a half ago, two men beat up two members who answered the

door and then broke the front door. Ravenwood now has bullet proof glass in its front door.