

Guardian Angels try to ease tension at Elena Christian

By AESHA DUVAL

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Daily News Photo by FIONA STOKES-GIFFT Elena Christian Junior High students Darren Richards, 12, and Camirah Osorio, 14, paint benches at the school on Friday morning.

ST. CROIX - Steering youngsters away from violence and relieving tension was the focus of Pride and Unity Day at Elena Christian Junior High School on Friday as members of the Guardian Angels worked with school administrators to curb violence among students.

Principal Susanna Smith said she and Woodson Junior High School Principal Vaughn Hewitt invited the Guardian Angels to the school to help put a stop to violence and bad behavior and promote unity and pride among students.

"We're hoping the students learn how to better interact with each other," Smith said.

Since September, the V.I. Education Department has held two school sessions at the La Grande Princesse school. Elena students attend one session in the morning and Woodson students go in the afternoon. Both school populations are kept separated and have very little interaction during the change of sessions.

Woodson is closed for mold remediation and education officials anticipate reopening the school in August.

Teachers at both schools have complained that sharing space and resources is taking its toll and the shortened schedule makes it difficult to hold school activities and after-school programs.

In recent months, there have been reports of students bringing weapons to school and incidents of fighting on campus. While there have been no incidents of violence between Elena and Woodson students, Smith said the tension exists.

"This is a day to build school spirit, a sense of community and develop school pride," Smith said. "This will also help students relax before taking the Iowa tests next week."

Guardian Angels senior director Arnaldo Salinas said the group is planning to stay at Elena and Woodson to help address school safety, in-school suspensions, community service and other initiatives geared toward creating a better learning environment free of disruptions.

The Angels started the day Friday morning by searching each Elena student with metal detectors at the school entrance. Salinas said the searches turned up no weapons.

Woodson students also were searched when they arrived in the afternoon.

"We wanted to send a clear message that there will be no guns or no weapons allowed," Salinas said. "We're not here to put a Band-Aid on the problem. We are here to stay and help empower these kids to develop to their full potential."

The students were told to come dressed in plain clothes. They were separated into groups and given either work detail such as painting and picking up trash or educational and team-building games to play in the courtyard.

Some games went as planned, but one game involving blown-up balloons quickly turned into a balloon-popping fest. Angels director Joseph Crooms let the students have their fun.

"They're relieving stress and they can do that knowing they are in a safe environment," Crooms said.

Whenever a group of boys wandered off, one or two Angels quickly rounded them up and put them back to work or spoke to them about following directions.

Elena eighth-grader Adowa Fleming, 15, said he was glad to see the Guardian Angels at his school and that it was "a miracle" that his fellow students behaved so well.

"It's a good thing because so many fights have been going on," he said.

In light of violent deaths and criminal activities in 2004, the Guardian Angels were invited by the St. Croix Anti-Crime Task Force to assist local law enforcement. The volunteer patrol organization established a St. Croix chapter last year and graduated its first class of volunteers.

The Guardian Angels Safety Patrol began 27 years ago on Feb. 13 with 13 youngsters aboard the No. 4 train in New York City. Guardian Angels founder and president Curtis Sliwa, a McDonald's night manager at the time, was fed up with crime he saw around the restaurant. He led the "Magnificent Thirteen" and began riding subways between the toughest stops to find the gang members who had been mugging passengers on the subway and detain them for the police to arrest.

The Angels get self-defense training but carry no weapons.

The Angels were not always met with open arms. They once were labeled vigilantes, but that perception has changed during the years, Salinas said, as more people have been educated about the organization's mission.

Chapters now exist in counties, states and townships across the country and in locations around the world.