

# ST. CROIX SOURCE

## Guardian Angels Providing Morale Boost to Students, Faculty

by Melody Wiggins



March 12, 2006 -- Students at John H. Woodson and the Elena Christian junior high schools have been getting much-needed special attention lately from the International Alliance of Guardian Angels. A special education team arrived in the territory to focus on lifting the morale of the junior high school students and to begin an Urban Guardian Angels program at the two schools.

The two junior high schools merged in September 2005 after mold problems forced the relocation of Woodson students and faculty. The school serves both populations in double sessions -- with Elena's

424 students attending in the morning and Woodson's 620 pupils in the afternoon.

Education officials said Woodson would not be ready to accept students until September 2006.

The first order of business was to rid the school of graffiti, said Guardian Angels Senior Director Arnaldo Salinas. Salinas has made several visits to St. Croix in the past two years. The Angels led a team of students and covered graffiti in the halls and bathrooms.

"I wanted to show the students that graffiti is damaging and should not be used as a tool of expression," said Salinas. Some of the graffiti still shows through the primer paint, and Salinas said the team, along with students and faculty, will begin painting the entire school in the next few days. Benches in the common area were painted Friday by students and faculty.

The team, along with faculty from both schools, led the students through ice breakers, team- and character-building exercises throughout the week. "We need to destress these students," Salinas said. "We are not reinventing the wheel, we have done this before."

Salinas said the exercises would help students develop better concentration and begin to work together. "And it's fun," he said.

The team will begin to lay the groundwork for the Guardian Angels Education Academy, which includes faculty and student training in school violence prevention, classroom behavior management techniques, bullying, gangs, and diversity and cultural awareness. The program creates customized programs to fit a school's particular needs.

Tensions have been running high since the two schools started sharing space. In February, Woodson teachers staged a job action saying the administration was not communicating with them about the status of

repairs at their school. At that meeting, some teachers said the situation is causing low student productivity (See "Woodson Teachers Want Answers, Refuse to Teach").

There have also been reports of clashes between students, and Salinas said two students were caught Friday bringing marijuana on campus.

The team is on St. Croix courtesy of the federal Safe and Drug Free Schools program, according to Eileen Pennick, St. Croix project manager. Pennick said the program was scheduled to begin in September but because of federal funding problems with the Education Department, it did not start until months later. Pennick said Education Commissioner Noreen Michael authorized special funds to be used so the program could begin. She said after the initial focus on the junior high schools, the program will be expanded to other schools under the Safe and Drug Free program.

The Guardian Angels arrived on St. Croix on March 7 and will stay until March 18. Accompanying Salinas are John Ayala, Guardian Angels Mid-Atlantic regional director; Joseph Crooms, Urban Guardian Angels director; and Anthony Rivera, a 20-year Guardian Angels veteran based in New York.

Salinas, who has made several visits to St. Croix, said he has been in contact with education officials on a daily basis and that the principals at both schools have been "very open" to the Angels' programs.

The Guardian Angels first visited St. Croix in 2004 at the invitation of the St. Croix Anti-Crime Coalition. Since then, they have returned several times to offer training and provide a presence on the island. In April, 30 St. Croix residents were part of the first Virgin Islands Guardian Angels class.

In August, public school monitors participated in a Guardian Angels training program incorporating Guardian Angel techniques and experience into the curriculum to accentuate the importance of safety in schools.

Vaughn Hewitt, Woodson school principal, is optimistic about the presence of the Guardian Angels on his campus.

"I really like it, their approach will help the schools and give the students another perspective on life and living together," said Hewitt. "It's a good program."