

News

Angels over Highland Park

By CHRIS SUGRUE

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• *Howick and Pakuranga Times*

ANGELS were watching over Highland Park.

Saturday saw the first eastern suburb patrol by the South Auckland Guardian Angels, and a Pakuranga-based chapter is on the cards.

The international citizen anti-crime patrollers chose the Highland Home Centre, the site of several recent violent late night incidents, for their first eastern beat.

They were alerted to local business and parent concern after attending a public meeting there on May 9.

New Zealand's first Angels chapter opened in Waitakere City in January (*Times*, January 19). Since then patrols have commenced in Avondale and now in Manukau.



Angels among us - Guardian Angels national spokesman Andy Cawston (centre) flanked by south Auckland chapter leader Phoenix and Alpha One. Times photo Chris Sugrue

The Guardian Angels originated in New York in 1979. Their founder Curtis Sliwa was a McDonald's night manager who decided to put an end to crime plaguing his neighbourhood. From patrolling New York's streets and subways, the red-bereted Angels have spread to more than 60 cities worldwide.

It was in his native Vancouver that New Zealand's first Angel, Andy Cawston, first saw the concept in action.

He says that while the Angels are trained in martial arts, and operate according to a 500-page training manual, they're not the quasi-military vigilantes their denigrators imply.

The Waitakere chapter hasn't used physical force once on its patrols. Rather, like patrols overseas, they've relied on their conspicuous presence in generally four-to-six person patrols to discourage offences.

"We act with respect. People always respond to that," Mr Cawston says.

South Auckland's newly appointed chapter leader, who goes by his patrol name Phoenix, agrees the Angels' role is more preventive than reactive. He says the police attitude to them so far has ranged from lukewarm to helpful, with officers now offering to screen aspiring Angels.

With backgrounds in the security industry, Phoenix and his chapter's first female Angel, codenamed Alpha One, are typical of recruits to have flocked to existing Auckland patrols.

But they say they'll accept people with "slightly dodgy" records, as long as they've shown a genuine desire to change.

Mr Cawston says former gang members rank among the overseas organisations' best, thanks to their affinity with the streets they patrol.

At a civic level, the Angels last week received a positive reception from Manukau City Council's community safety committee. Pakuranga councillor Neil Morrison invited the group to address his ward's community board on June 19, with other councillors doing the same.

Phoenix says his chapter is operating citywide, but as more volunteers join up, additional localised patrols will ensue. He says a Pakuranga resident has indicated an interest in founding a local chapter.

Community safety committee chairman Dick Quax cautiously welcomes the Angels' Manukau presence.

“Any citizen who’s prepared to go out and act on behalf of the community promoting community safety should be welcomed.

“But it’s their modus operandi some have had some questions about.

“If they make the community safer, all power to them.

“But for me, like every other group, they have to prove themselves.”