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New Angels are ready to take to the streets

The Guardian Angels' inaugural recruits plan to report on, and occasionally get in the way of, crime in Minneapolis.

John Schulte hasn't ruled out someday recruiting 802 trained pavement-pounders -- one for every Minneapolis police officer -- who could give street thugs pause.

But for now, Schulte, 50, the leader of the newly resurrected Guardian Angels citizen patrol, will settle for the chapter's first 31 graduates, who were awarded their "wings" at a ceremony Sunday and who plan to hit Minneapolis sidewalks for the first time Tuesday night.

"We want to be the eyes and ears" for the police, explained Schulte, an advertising executive and northeast Minneapolis resident.

"And to hopefully save a few people from being beaten and mugged," he added.

Having survived a three-month training regimen, this first Angels crop is an eclectic mix: it includes a barbershop owner, a computer programmer, a 61-year-old woman who runs a north Minneapolis karate dojo, and a 16-year-old who joined with his dad.

And many of them share an idealism and realism about the role they expect to serve, more crime deterrers than crime fighters -- though ready to do the latter.

"My goal is to make sure that every thug and criminal ... will know that there are people out there who are not afraid of them," Schulte said. "We're not afraid to turn you in. We're not afraid to act as a witness. And, if necessary, in the correct circumstance, we will arrest you and hold you for the police."

That tactic, Schulte guesses, is unlikely to be used often, and only when an Angel patrol sees someone in danger, perhaps if a person is being mugged.

More typically, Schulte said, Angel patrols -- expected to be six strong or more, at least initially -- will be alerting cops to drug deals, jotting down the license plate numbers of anyone trying to do business with a prostitute and in general making folks up to no good feel uncomfortable because of their presence on the streets.

As with any citizen action group, police urge members of the Angels to stay safe and respect the rights of those they encounter on the streets, said Lt. Greg Reinhardt.

But at the same time, he said, the police "welcome any citizen participation in crime prevention."

This reincarnation of the Angels will look much like the patrols that roamed Minneapolis for a few years starting in the late 1980s.

They will retain the trademark garb of red berets and T-shirts or red jackets.

And they will continue to be unarmed during their patrols, which will be concentrated on weekend nights.

Yet now, with radios and cell phones at hand, they plan to be better able to coordinate their activities each night. And they intend a more vigorous recruiting campaign, aided by continuous self-defense and conditioning training at Splawn's Okinawan Karate Kobudo, a dojo in north Minneapolis.

Its owner, Alice Splawn, 61, who lives in northeast Minneapolis, not only has been running the training sessions, she also became an Angel herself, along with her husband, her son and, soon, her son's wife.

She said that at work and at home, they have seen how bold criminals have become and decided to more than just stew.

"Well, if it's wrong, then let's do something about it," Splawn said.

She and the other new Angels have gotten practice this summer by going out on late-night patrols in northeast Minneapolis with a neighborhood group.

Even for Tom Olsen, the owner of Tom's Style and Tanning on Lowry and Central Avenues, who has seen his fair share of drug dealing and other crime around his shop, the patrols have been eye-opening -- and a further spur to action.

One night, a mother out with her 4-year-old son asked Olsen and other patrollers to walk her a mere two blocks so she could get to Walgreens. The boy made a comment to Olsen about needing to protect his mom.

"I just thought that was sad," said Olsen, 58, of New Brighton.

Schulte and other new Angels say they have no delusions that they can make such problems disappear.

But they express a dedication to encouraging a change of scenery for criminals, and to eventually expand the group or its partnerships throughout Minneapolis and the metro area.

Schulte may let out a sheepish laugh when he recounts the letter he wrote to Dolan about his goal of a one-to-one Angel-to-officer ratio back in the spring as the chapter was just forming.

But he reasons, with a metro area so big, it could be possible. "I always think big," he said. "I think that's the way to go."