

D.C. Youths Take Bold Steps Against Street Crime

Carver Terrace Teens Aim 'To Make a Difference'

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A crime wave. Community outrage. A citizen protest. A march led by adult leaders.

The scenario has played out countless times in the District over the years, with mixed results.

But recently, on a chilly Wednesday night in the worn and troubled Carver Terrace neighborhood in Northeast Washington, there was something distinctly different about this anti-crime march: Amid the adults were some area youths who had stepped up in a way seldom seen in this city.

There was 19-year-old India Henderson, a new Advisory Neighborhood Commission member who was leading the march with her mother, Kathy Henderson, a former commissioner, who stepped down from the elected post in January after serving since 1998.



India Henderson, 19, sought and won election to the Advisory Neighborhood Commission to help her community. (By Carol Guzy -- The Washington Post)

And then there were four neighborhood teens -- some who admitted they had been up to mischief in the community in the past -- who are newly minted members of the Guardian Angels, a citizen safety patrol group that carries police radios and has surfaced in the neighborhood once known as "Little Vietnam" because of its violence.



From left, Mikhal Crockett, 15;

John Ayala, head of the D.C. chapter of the Guardian Angels; Alaric Hodge Jr., 16; Johnnie Harris, 15; and India Henderson, 19, a newly elected ANC commissioner, are taking their place in the fight to save the Carver Terrace neighborhood from crime.

"I get tired of having older adults or younger adults say how we're not doing anything, or why don't we do something more meaningful and constructive," said India Henderson, a biology major at the University of the District of Columbia. "This is not something we can turn away from. This is where we eat and sleep every day. Individuals can no longer bash teenagers for not stepping up to the plate and doing something."

The latest surge of community activism was triggered by a rash of murders and the brazen wounding of a building contractor in the past four months in the Carver Terrace neighborhood, an area bounded by Hechinger Mall and the National Arboretum that Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.) calls the "forgotten community, because it's off the beaten track."

"I know this neighborhood, and I regard this as a very important neighborhood," she said.

On Jan. 13, in the 1200 block of 18th Street NE, a contractor working on a home was shot nine times after he asked some area youths to stop sitting on his car.

On Jan. 6, Lovell Harris, 17, was shot to death in the 2100 block of I Street NE. Several blocks away, a 15-year-old was shot and wounded in what police said may have been a related incident.

Henderson and her mother have been pressing police for more help. The younger Henderson also is raising money for the contractor, who survived the nine bullets, and she is stepping before the television cameras to speak her mind, having learned a thing or two under the tutelage of her mom.

The recent spate of violence also prompted six neighborhood teens -- four of whom showed up at the Jan. 17 march -- to join the Guardian Angels.

Among them was Alaric Hodge Jr., 16, clad in the group's standard attire: red beret and red baseball-style jacket.

"I live in the neighborhood, and when I heard about the Guardian Angels, I was like, well, with my help and me living around here, I could probably make a difference," he said.

Friend Johnnie Harris, 15, piped in: "I joined mostly because one of my best friends got killed last week. I wanted to make a difference in the community.

"I think I can change people's hearts, seeing me, of all people in this group, because they know how I am," he said. "I like fighting, I like things like that. But I want to make peace in this neighborhood. I stopped fighting. I stopped being bad. I get excellent grades in school."

John Ayala, the D.C. chapter leader and the mid-Atlantic director of the Guardian Angels, said many youths in the city have been reluctant to join his local group, which currently numbers about 40, out of fear of being pegged a "snitch" or cop. But in Carver Terrace, he said, the teens have taken "the next step."

"They're not going to let the peer pressure keep them from getting involved," he said.

Kathy Henderson, who remains a community activist, said she was overjoyed to see the youths joining the Guardian Angels.

"I've already congratulated them for being leaders and role models," she said. "I think it's a testimonial to their character . . . and [good] for them to eschew the negative peer pressure. I told them that, and they were a little wistful and saying 'Aw, shucks.' "

She also applauds her daughter's leadership.

"I had drug dealers try to run against me before," she said. "I couldn't think of a better person than India" to take over as ANC commissioner. "I asked her about it, and she said, 'You know what, Mom, you need me to do this, and the community needs this. I guess I'll step up to the plate.' "

India Henderson, who plans to be a cardiologist -- "I have a strong mind for the heart," she said -- also hopes to set an example in her neighborhood. She said she particularly wants to be a model for some children who "were not blessed with the best parents."

"Unfortunately, the streets don't care for anyone, they just use you," she said. "I hope to help now. I'm only going to be young for so long."