

Guardian Angels encounter turbulence

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The distinctive paramilitary gear of the Guardian Angels, who are in Victoria on a fact-finding mission, triggered passionate reaction downtown yesterday afternoon.

Two Guardian Angels co-ordinators, dressed in red, military-style berets, red bomber jackets with the wings of the Angels emblazoned across their backs, and red and white T-shirts, hardly started their news conference beside the Johnson Street Bridge, before hecklers took over.

"We just don't need citizens on our streets in red hats and American-style law-and-order. Please don't spread your ideas round here," said Bob Dechambeau, a Cormorant Street resident.

"We need our politicians to get on with more housing and more social services. We don't need more cops and more people in red hats on the streets."

As the strong smell of marijuana drifted over the group, Vancouver residents Dennis Watson and Sebastian Metz, who have worked with the Guardian Angels in New York City and helped set up chapters around the world, struggled to explain the purpose of the Guardian Angels is to make people feel safe on the streets.

"We work with the homeless, we help them. We don't harass or injure them," said Metz, taking a feet-apart military stance.

Dechambeau was not convinced.

"I think they wear red coats to cover up their red necks," he muttered.

However, his neighbour, Patrick White, believes the Angels should be given a chance, especially in troubled areas of the downtown, such as Cormorant Street.

Vandalism, needles stuck in tires and people using the street as a toilet are common problems, he said.

"It's about 30 [crack-addicted] people really causing the problems," he said.

The Angel representatives were invited to Victoria by a group of residents, led by Stewart Johnston, a lawyer with an office on Cormorant Street, who has been active in trying to get street activity cleaned up.

"I came to Victoria in 1978 and fell in love with the city and what's happening in the downtown is breaking my heart. I can't sit by and say nothing," he said.



CREDIT: Darren Stone, Times Colonist
Guardian Angels Dennis Watson, left, and Sebastian Metz walk along Blanshard Street yesterday during their visit to gauge the level of interest in starting a group in Victoria.

The Angels, who train community volunteers to conduct safety patrols, met with community representatives yesterday morning and will decide later whether there is enough interest among residents to form a chapter in Victoria.

That could be months or even years away.

"We wanted to see whether it is a tool we want to use," Johnston said.

"They will only form a chapter if they are invited by a community group."

The Guardian Angels, founded in 1979 in the Bronx, New York City, have chapters in five Canadian cities, including Vancouver.

Their interest is stopping violent crime and Victoria's problem is more property crime, but they also help stop graffiti and tagging, Johnston said.

Guardian Angels chapters are funded by donation. Volunteers are trained in everything from martial arts to first aid and conflict resolution, Watson said.

"It's a crime watch, acting as eyes and ears for the police. The only difference is we exercise our right to make citizen's arrests. If we witness criminal activity the whole idea is to try and defuse the situation and, as a last resort we will make a citizen's arrest," he said.

That means holding a person until the police get there and using only reasonable force, but if someone fights, the Angel can defend himself, Watson said.

As the Guardian Angels strode through the downtown, ending up on Cormorant Street, reaction was split.

"Yes, I am thinking of joining," said Jeff Hurry, owner of Joint Pizzeria.

"I think it's a brilliant idea," said Brodie Vermeulen, watching from the back of a construction truck.

Robert Randall, chairman of the Downtown Residents Association, said he thinks the Angels could be part of the solution to the behaviour crimes and anti-social behaviour by the "bar crowd."

Philippe Lucas of the Committee to End Homelessness in Victoria said he worries about vigilantism.

Victoria's problems are poverty and substance abuse rather than gang violence, he said.

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