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Angels spread wings downtown Police, businesses have no beef with citizen security force

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Five nights a week, from an hour up to six hours a night, Jeff Callen dons his red Guardian Angels beret and walks the streets of downtown Madison making sure everything is peaceful.

For two months this winter he was on State Street every night, sometimes wanting to cry because his ears were so cold, he said.

"Even if it's freezing cold, it makes sense for me to be out there to help someone," said Callen, who works construction by day.

Callen, 39, joined the Guardian Angels in Pittsburgh when he was 15. He sometimes brings his own 15-year-old son, Brandon, out on patrol with him. Callen has lived in Madison for 10 years and started the Madison chapter last August.

Madison police officials, Guardian Angels members and those who work in downtown bars, restaurants and shops say that to the extent the fledgling group's impact can be measured, it's had a positive impact on the downtown. The Madison Police Department was lukewarm on the Angels' arrival in Madison nine months ago, but has come to value them.

They "help bring greater awareness to personal safety, and anybody out there who helps bring greater awareness to our increasingly urban metropolitan environment can only help," said Madison Police Lt. Joe Balles of the Central District.

Balles and police spokesman Mike Hanson say it's hard to know the impact of the citizen security force because police don't keep statistics correlating the organization's arrival in Madison with an increase or decrease in crime.

"We haven't had any communication in terms of when their patrols are, how many there are in Madison. We don't have a way to gauge their success one way or another," Hanson said, adding, "We welcome anyone who's interested in promoting public safety, from a grass-roots effort particularly."

The local Angels are out most nights beginning at about 8 p.m. or 9 p.m., often patrolling until bar time -- 2:30 a.m. on Saturdays and Sundays and 2 a.m. on other days -- or beyond. They typically launch their patrols from State and Broom streets.

There are eight dedicated, volunteer members. And when they're lucky, between four and six members patrol together. Six of those members -- five men and one woman -- graduated Sunday at the Pres House. Curtis Sliwa, president and founder of the New York-based group, flew in to preside over the ceremony.

Recruits undergo about three months of local training, including physical conditioning, self-defense, filling out patrol logs and learning the organization's rules and guidelines, Callen said.

The Madison group is the Guardian Angels' 84th chapter. There are chapters in nine countries and close to 5,000 members worldwide.

Sliwa considered bringing his organization to Madison in the late 1980s, when the city was seeing a spike in crime. He had a three-hour conversation with then-Police Chief David Couper, who Sliwa said was fascinated with the Guardian Angels' practice of not carrying weapons and instead making citizen's arrests.

At the time, the city was not ready for the Guardian Angels, Sliwa said.

"This time around, the invitations were coming as a result of crime creeping into the downtown and definitely having a strong Chicago influence and strong gang-related scenarios," Sliwa said by phone recently.

Guardian Angels have made a number of citizen's arrests, detained suspects and turned them over to police in Madison, Sliwa said.

The first incident happened shortly after the Angels from Chicago and Green Bay arrived for their first visit to Madison in July, The Capital Times reported. Angels found two men making a transaction behind a business at 528 State St. and police arrested a man on a drug charge after they arrived and found Angels shining a flashlight on a rock of crack that had fallen on the ground.

The next night, the group broke up a domestic battery in a parking lot at 420 W. Gorham St. Angels held the suspect until police arrived and he was arrested on two counts of battery.

On two occasions, the Madison Angels have stopped intruders from breaking into houses, but mainly the group has broken up a number of fights outside downtown bars, Callen and Sliwa said.

Callen, who also does security work for Cue-Nique Billiards, was working April 14 when a brawl involving as many as 120 people broke out outside of the pool hall. Callen said he started to intervene but had belts flying in his face. "Once I saw the police and what they were doing, I just moved out of it," he said.

In general, Guardian Angels say, they stay out of the way of the police. If they see a fight in progress they intervene and then immediately call police. They are then able to provide eyewitness accounts.

There's more mundane work, too. Callen does recruiting for the group, handing out fliers during the day. He has been trying to meet with community groups and neighborhood associations to let them know more about the Guardian Angels. He and fellow Angels

can also be found picking up broken bottles in front of State Street stores, changing someone's flat tire, or walking college women home at night.

"We're just there trying to be a good influence on people and give them some pride back in their community. We stand up and take some of the responsibility instead of letting the police do it or letting someone else take care of it. Whatever it is we can do for the community we will do it. That's what we're here for," Callen said.

And many who live and work downtown say they appreciate that.

Downtown Ald. Mike Verveer said that while the Madison Angels may not be large in number, they are visible downtown.

"I have seen them many, many weekend nights walking around the State Street area. They are highly visible and they are out there volunteering and watching things, so I have no complaints about them or criticisms. Obviously, their hearts are in the right place."

Katy Hei, a bartender at the Irish Pub on State Street, thinks the Angels can only help. "It's not going to prevent everything, but I think it's always good to have people around keeping an eye on things," she said.

Hawk Schenkel, owner of Hawk's Bar & Grill and president of the Greater State Street Business Association, said he can't imagine how the group could do any damage. One of the problems he'd heard about the group was that they would come into communities too quickly, but, he said, "I don't think they did that here. They came and they talked to people, they talked to the police. I think they have established themselves fairly well."

Peter Kaesberg works at B-Side Records, next to the problem-plagued Peace Park on State Street. He said he sees Callen often, sometimes walking his dog during the day. Monday night, Kaesberg saw Callen potentially breaking up a fight at the park.

"The fact that someone feels the need to have vigilante sort of stuff in Madison is kind of a drag, but who knows, maybe (the police) do need it. Maybe they need a little more presence."

Lt. Balles agreed.

Every year, he said, police try to educate the same young adult population on locking their doors. The bulk of burglaries, and many sexual assaults, happen because an intruder goes through an open door.

"I do think they are helping us promote the message that we can't get out enough," Balles said of the Angels. "That is the need for young adults to be aware of their personal safety downtown."

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