

OAKLAND

Angels on the scene

Grand Lake neighbors get help after recent spike in crime

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Dressed in their trademark bright-red berets and windbreakers, a small but determined group of Guardian Angels began patrolling an Oakland neighborhood Friday that has been plagued recently by a spate of robberies and burglaries.

The Guardian Angels, an unarmed volunteer group formed in 1979 to fight back against stick-up robbers on New York City subways, were invited to Oakland's usually peaceful and safe Grand Lake neighborhood by residents who have become increasingly frustrated by the spike in crime.

"I want to use my knowledge and skills to give back to the community," said one of the Guardian Angels who identified himself only by his street name, "Mak." "I also want to be a role model to kids so they can see they can make a difference in the world."

Merchants and residents working, shopping or dining at cafes along bustling Lakeshore Avenue on Friday largely embraced the five-member safety patrol -- comprised of three Guardian Angel members from the group's San Diego, San Francisco and Sacramento chapters and two Oakland volunteers. Also welcoming them were Oakland police who met Thursday night with the group to discuss the Angels' role in Oakland, including the possibility of expanding their patrol to the affluent Rockridge district.

"I'm glad to see them out," said Connie Divack, a longtime Lake Merritt area resident, who said her neighborhood has recently been targeted by a band of car thieves. "Unfortunately, there are not enough police to solve the problem. Having the Guardian Angels here adds a little respect back to the neighborhood."

"We all need to step up and take our community back," said Paula Welsh, co-owner of the Center Stage West salon on Lakeshore Avenue, adding that she hopes the Angels will deter criminal behavior. "This is our livelihood. In my 26 years working here, I've never seen it this bad."

Three members of the Guardian Angels introduced themselves to merchants and people along Grand Avenue and Lakeshore Avenue. They handed out leaflets and recruited a few volunteers, including Mary Swift, a software technical writer from Oakland.

The Angels typically bring members from out of town when a new area is selected for patrolling and then train local residents to take over. The San Francisco chapter planned to begin working today with those

Grand Lake residents who wish to go through the organization's three-month training program.

"I want to see what I can do to help these guys out," said Swift, who plans to endure background checks and take the training to become a Guardian Angel. "This is the best place I've ever lived. When I hear about the rising crime, it's so vastly different from the experience I've had here. I want everyone to feel comfortable here."

Organizer and resident Nic Montesclaros, who joined the safety patrol Friday handing out leaflets seeking volunteers, said she would like to see the Guardian Angels form chapters throughout Oakland.

"I don't want this to be just here in Grand Lake," said Montesclaros, who invited the Guardian Angels to Oakland after several of her neighbors were robbed, including one at gunpoint in her home.

Oakland Sgt. Michael Poirier said he came out Friday to support the Guardian Angels and the neighborhood crime prevention council's effort to raise awareness about safety in the neighborhood. The Angels came at the council's invitation.

The Guardian Angels -- whose members come from varied backgrounds, including security, military and martial arts -- said they are prepared to intercept criminal activity, including making citizen arrests, but Poirier said he hoped their main function would be to provide a reassuring presence as well as help residents become more aware of ways they can avoid becoming victims of crime.

"It's just another piece of the puzzle," Poirier said, adding that the extra patrols would dovetail nicely with the Police Department's stepped-up patrols and robbery-suppression teams assigned to the neighborhood. "What the Guardian Angels, working with the neighborhood groups, are really going to do is make the area unattractive to criminals."

For their part, the Guardian Angels -- who encountered a handful of hecklers, including one man who told them to go back to New York -- said they hope to help Oakland residents become their own Guardian Angels by forming local chapters. The Angels patrolling Friday will be here throughout the weekend and sporadically thereafter.

"Our goal is to get people involved," said Erick Wong, Guardian Angels California regional director. "That's the foundation of the Oakland chapter."

For more information about the effort to establish an Oakland chapter of the Guardian Angels, call (415) 987-2960.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/06/09/BAG4AQCBK1.DTL>

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