

Grand Lake has angels in its corner

Crime prevention group walking streets in area experiencing crime surge

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Inside Bay Area

Article Last Updated:06/09/2007 01:31:39 PM PDT

OAKLAND — Their bright red berets and jackets turned many heads Friday afternoon as members of the San Diego chapter of the Guardian Angels met with Grand Lake residents and business owners.

Erick Wong, chapter leader and California regional director, walked along Lakeshore Avenue and Grand Avenue in order to establish a presence in the neighborhood and to engage residents in an effort to reduce crime in the area. They're looking for volunteers to continue patrolling here, Wong said.

Nic Montesclaros and her partner, Mechelle Hutchens, contacted the group in response to a recent surge in crime in their Grand Lake neighborhood. Hutchens said she learned about the increase in armed robbery at a district-wide neighborhood watch meeting last month. Police officers told them they had to focus their efforts in the higher crime areas of East Oakland and suggested the community be more proactive in their own area.

"We thought, what else could we do?" said Hutchens. "Let's unite as a whole city to try to not have (crime) here."

She said the Guardian Angels had also received calls from people in the Rockridge area, and from residents of Pinole in West Contra Costa County.

In the past 90 days, the Oakland Police Department has received nine reports of burglary, eight reports of robbery, 17 reports of vehicle theft, three reports of aggravated assault and 24 reports of theft in the Grand Lake area.

One of the incidents that precipitated the call to the Guardian Angels occurred on May 28. A nail shop on the 3600 block of Grand Avenue was held up by three suspects, one armed with a gun. The bandit pointed the weapon at a 30-year-old employee's head and demanded money, leaving with less than \$100.

The Guardian Angels will continue to patrol the area through Saturday and Sunday, from 11 a.m. until midnight, Wong said.

For those interested in participating, the Guardian Angels will provide three months of training, including instruction in martial arts, self-defense, citizens arrest procedures, communications skills and how to patrol an area.

"We are encouraging people to get involved and make this a safer place to live," Wong said in a telephone interview. "As long as people (want to participate) we are here to give them guidance, knowledge, training and tools so they can run their own program," he said.

As the group marched down Mandana Boulevard to Grand Avenue, cars honked and waved, drivers giving the thumbs-up sign to the entourage. Some passers-by simply turned their heads, with a bewildered look.

Though some skeptics might wonder why the group is in a prosperous neighborhood like Grand Lake, not in areas that need more supervision, the community organization ACORN has a different perspective.

"I'm supporting the Guardian Angels and the request for patrols (in Rockridge and Grand Lake)," said Xochitl Cervantes, chair of the Melrose ACORN chapter.

It can be empowering for an affluent neighborhood to take charge of their community, she said.

The Guardian Angels "are not a solution to deep and cyclical violence," that plagues other parts of the city that are in need of advocacy through education and stronger community relationships, Cervantes said.

This could point to a possible reason why the Oakland Guardian Angels Chapter was not successful in the early 1980s. According to reports in Tribune archives, the chapter dwindled to only eight members in 1983, due to lack of support from the community.

Hopefully, that will change with the recent invitation from Oakland, residents say.

"We need to try to eradicate (crime) by letting criminals know we are on the lookout," Wong said. "The people of Oakland are fed up."

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