

## When we were Angels From the Boston Globe



*Kent Benjamin (left) and Haji Shearer patrolled Boston in the early 1980s as members of the Guardian Angels . (Kent Benjamin)*

By Kent Benjamin and Haji Shearer | April 9, 2007

IT'S SPRING. The economy is down. Violent crime in Boston is up. The violence has shaken some communities and drawn widespread press coverage. Amid the chaos, a controversial figure arrives in town saying local people need to join with his Guardian Angels to push back against thugs and drug dealers. He insists that the Guardian Angels are the answer.

His arrival causes mixed reactions. Some young people are inspired and want to join with him. Many older folks -- including the mayor and police commissioner -- are reluctant to embrace this crusader in a red beret. They insist they don't need outsiders coming into their town to solve their problems.

This story takes place not in 2007, but in 1981. We were two 19-year-old college

dropouts working menial jobs who were sufficiently inspired to join Angels leader Curtis Sliwa's campaign. Starting as neophytes in the group, we rose through the ranks to become an assistant chapter leader and a patrol leader. Ultimately, we returned to college after our tenure with the Angels and went on to careers in public service.

In 2007, history is repeating itself, though with a twist. Now we are former Dorchester residents still connected to the killing spree through family, friends, and the media. Now we appreciate the other side of the debate over accepting the Angels. How can this man, who didn't save the city last time, do it this time?

But then we recalled saving the city was never the real mission of the "GA," as we called it in those heady days of secret handshakes and testosterone-rich adventures. The real but unspoken mission was to give young people something to believe in, something positive and exciting to be part of, rather than something to avoid or fear. It helped raise these two -- and many other -- young, confused adults into mature, responsible adults and molded them into true citizens. The GA gave us figurative and literal voices in the condition of our city. The organization inspired us to be part of the solution rather than to dodge the trouble and hide behind locked doors shaking our heads.

For us, it turned two unfocused college dropouts into media spokespeople and leaders of men and women. The GA encouraged us to take a stand and provided a structure that motivated us from timid to courageous. We can still regale those who will listen with tales from those nights of marching through the urban streets and meeting with mixed reactions: frequent smiles, hostile stares, and occasional giggles.

Over the course of more than five years of combined Angel involvement, we watched as participation in the group gave dignity, confidence, and civic pride to black, Latino, white, and Asian young adults who had previously been alienated from the leadership of the city.

Unexpectedly, a company vice president would ask a mail clerk about his patrol adventures and smile back admiringly. Gradually, a chapter of more than 100 citizen patrollers in more than a dozen squads kept watch over Boston's streets and subways in nightly vigils. Eventually, urban and suburban youth of many backgrounds were hugging at the end of patrols and developing cross-cultural friendships. Years passed. Some Angels became spouses. Some became lifelong friends. Some became self-help authors, federal policy analysts, and state program directors.

As we once again watch inner-city Boston spin out of control and reminisce about the time we began to turn our caring into action, our hearts soften toward the Angels. We realize Curtis Sliwa can't save Boston. That will take a concerted effort of private, public, faith-, and family-based interventions. We understand his language can be inflammatory. But it was that kind of language that motivated us out of our living rooms 25 years ago. And maybe, once again, the Guardian Angels can help some young people take responsibility for their community. And maybe more disenfranchised young men and women will become productive citizens who never stop trying to make a difference.

Yes, it's spring, when a young man's fancy turns to thoughts of saving his city.

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