

Guardian Angels pick new Oakland chapter leader

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The Guardian Angels has named an Oakland chapter leader, its first step in establishing a long-term presence for the group in the East Bay.

The volunteer citizen patrol group was invited to Oakland two months ago by some individuals in response to rising street crime in business districts. The group spoke to community groups from Rockridge to Maxwell Park and has focused patrols around Lake Merritt, including Park Boulevard, Grand Avenue, Lakeshore Avenue, and the areas near Children's Fairyland from Thursdays to Sundays.

Cristina Fernandez, 38, a former pharmacy technician at Longs Drugs in Montclair, will be the city's new group leader.

"To me, the Guardian Angels were like superheroes, out there to protect you, fighting crime," she said. "I used to look up to them."

Fernandez, who worked at Longs Drugs for 17 years until about a year ago, met up with the Guardian Angels' first visit to Oakland in June. Since then, she has been training and on patrols with the group twice a week in the Grand Lake area.

Fernandez said she will graduate in about two months, after learning how to walk the streets, look for "shady characters" and activity and to intervene to help a resident in need.

"Once people see them, they walk away," she said. "I believe our presence in Oakland is starting to have an effect."

For example, this past Friday, the group encountered a group of youths sitting and drinking at about 11:30 p.m. in a park on Park Boulevard, she said. With the presence of 10 Guardian Angels, the youths disbanded and left the park.

The number of Guardian Angels depends on the volunteers' availability, said Freddy Batres Madrid, regional adviser for the Guardian Angels and the San Francisco chapter leader. Batres said nine other Oaklanders have begun training to form the local group. The Oakland chapter needs at least 12 core members.

Many of the current volunteers travel from Southern California to come to Oakland. Until the group receives more community support, the expenses they incur come from their own pockets, including hotel stays, meals and phone calls. The group first needs a place for its Oakland headquarters, including a space where out-of-area members can stay when they are patrolling Oakland.

Madrid, who is a mechanic, said, "I'm doing what I can. We cannot be here 24-7 but we are happy with the results. Some people want to see results in a short time. We do it because we care."

Pamela Drake, the executive director of the Lakeshore Business Improvement District, is critical of the group.

"Their military attitude freaks me out," she said. "I see our society become militarized, especially after 9/11."

Drake said many merchants in Grand Lake don't like the perception that the area is crime-ridden and in need of the Guardian Angels. However, Drake said a few merchants have said they wanted the group's help.

Fernandez said the group wants to work with as many merchants as possible.

"I'm an Oakland resident and I'm tired of what's going on. My kids can't catch the bus or play outside like I used to," she said. As a mother of 13- and 20-year-olds, she said the volunteer work fits her perfectly. Fernandez's husband is in the military and she wants to contribute to her community in Oakland.

"We have people working hard. We have kids going to the military and getting killed. And then you have these kids who want to rob people," she said.

"Oakland is not bad at all. We need the community to get together," she said. "Appreciate what you have and start taking care of your community."

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