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Guardian Angels discuss setting up a KC area chapter

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On the corner of 35th Street and Prospect Avenue, outside Big D's Liquor and Grocery Store, they stood Thursday night, looking at first glance as solemn and ominous as a street gang.

The trio of Guardian Angels, in military-like red berets, dark cargo pants, combat boots, stood on a neighborhood corner where drug pushers, crack heads, the homeless and drunks mix among good neighborhood folks just trying to keep their heads up.

Their arms stamped with tattoos, they may have looked tough, but they were there to offer a different message to the Kansas City area.

When people would ask who they were, they explained coolly: "Trying to cease and desist it. ... We're trying to be eyes and ears. ... We're trying to help you take the streets back."

The Guardian Angels are in Kansas City this week to discuss starting a local chapter of the anti-crime group. They are meeting with city officials, community groups and church leaders on both sides of the state line.

On the street, people greeted them sometimes with street handshakes and sometimes with quizzical looks. And the Guardian Angels helped out, assisting a man who needed to call for medical help and others who were looking for a different life.

One young man in low-hanging red shorts and a white tank top, after hearing what they had to offer, gave them his name and number and said he might just sign up. He had just had his third child, he said, and after living a life of jail and drugs was ready for a change.

A few women from the community walked with them, hoping to ease their way.

They were also among those who assembled earlier in the evening at Paseo Baptist Church to hear the message the Guardian Angels brought, a message meant for those tired of dodging street crime and feeling threatened in their homes.

“I’m here because I’m a great-grandmother, a grandmother and mother, and our kids are dying,” said Ester L. Holzendorf.

Curtis Sliwa, the group’s founder, told the audience that by joining together they could make their community safer and fight back against the thugs and criminals who too often harass them.

“It’s not going to happen unless people join us,” Sliwa said. He said he needed “people who believe it’s us and we, not I and me.”

Thursday night’s forum followed a meeting earlier in the day with the Concerned Clergy Coalition at Calvary Temple Baptist Church in Kansas City, Kan. Some members met with Wyandotte County Unified Government leaders on Wednesday.

There will be more meetings today.

The Rev. Golden Davis Sr., the pastor at Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church, 1226 Armstrong Ave., invited the group to Kansas City, Kan., as a response to a drive-by shooting that killed a 2-year-old girl in the spring.

Davis said he felt that something needed to be done to stop the violence.

The group started by Sliwa in 1979 has chapters in 86 cities around the world. Its members are not vigilantes, Frank Lee, the East Coast director for the organization, told Wyandotte County leaders Wednesday. He said they work with law enforcement and are subordinate to police.

“The Police Department is doing its job, but a police officer cannot be in five places at one time,” he said. “That is why the citizens of the community have to step up to the plate to make their (police officers’) jobs a little bit easier.”

Sliwa echoed that message Thursday, saying the Guardian Angels depend on people who “dare to care.”

If there is enough interest, the organization will train local volunteers to patrol the two Kansas Citys and other parts of the area.

Lee told representatives from the Unified Government that unlike other citizen patrols that act as eyes and ears for police, the Guardian Angels make themselves highly visible, and they make citizen arrests in some instances.

“We are just mere citizens dressed in a little red beret, a white T-shirt, trying to make a difference in the community,” Lee said.

They don’t carry weapons or wear bulletproof vests, he explained.

Guardian Angels receive three weeks of training in areas such as the law, radio communications, and CPR and first aid. Also included is martial arts training.

After Thursday's meeting, Sliwa and his comrades headed out to patrol the area of 39th Street and Prospect Avenue. And he said he knew what to expect.

"A lot of people are going to look us and say, 'Who are you? Hells Angels? Charlie's Angels? Guardian Angels, what is that? And we'll have to explain.'"

But on the neighborhood corner, people looked like they just might welcome the newcomers to their street.