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# Guardian Angels try for local chapter

By **ADAM AASEN**,  
*The Times-Union*

A group of concerned citizens marched through Springfield in two single-file lines led by organizers wearing white shirts and red berets covered in pins.

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More information To find out more about the Guardian Angels, log on to [www.guardianangels.org](http://www.guardianangels.org) or call the national office at (212) 860-5575. Video Guardian Angels help police nab suspect Play

Leaders from the Guardian Angels, a national public safety group, were patrolling the streets with neighbors on Saturday, trying to start a Jacksonville chapter in response to the city's homicide rate.

As they neared the end of the walk at Sixth Street near Boulevard Street, a police car raced by with lights and sirens activated. A man jumped out of his silver truck and fled the police. That's when the group decided to get hands-on with crime in the city.

One Guardian Angel named Zay - a tall Jamaican now living in Jacksonville - ran after the suspect until he collapsed on a porch, twisting his ankle.

"We've got a man down!" yelled William Crews, regional director of the Florida Guardian Angels.

Minutes later, an officer walked by saying, "Thanks. You pushed him right to where our officers were and we caught him."

Springfield residents standing on their porches later applauded for the marchers.

It was an adrenaline-filled night for the dozen Springfield residents who trained with Guardian Angels representatives on how to be more proactive about crime in their area.

The Guardian Angels started in New York City in 1979 to patrol problem areas, report crimes to police and sometimes place criminals under citizen's

arrest. The members wear red berets and are trained in martial arts, but they are told never to carry weapons or engage people in violence. There are around 10 other chapters in the state, and Jacksonville would be the first one in Northeast Florida, Crews said.

Some have questioned their tactics, calling them a vigilante group. When they tried to start a Jacksonville chapter in 2003, some group members butted heads with neighbors who said they didn't want them there. A local chapter also was established in 1987, but the group faded away after a few months.

Zay said there are misconceptions about the group and whenever someone tries something different, some people are against it.

"We're not gangs. We're here for the community," he said. "We're here to take back the community from drug dealers, from prostitutes, from murderers, from rapists, from child molesters."

Wilka Claro, a Guardian Angel from Hollywood, Fla., taught the residents how to send a message to criminals that they're watching. She had the participants stand on every corner with their backs against street poles as a sign of unity.

"Me looking at you guys right now. I'm like wow. I mean, can you feel it? My hairs are standing up right now. They are," she said.

Some people heckled the group as they marched by, but many talked with the Guardian Angels about the crime in the area.

Shirley Jones, who is originally from New York but now lives in Springfield, said she recognized the red berets and was excited about a Jacksonville chapter.

"I welcome them to Jacksonville and I pray that the community at large does the same thing," she said.

Zay said the group hopes to meet with police and city officials to receive their support in forming the chapter. He said the goal is to help by being the police's eyes and ears.

"Police can't be everywhere at once. So we're here to make it easier for them and to make the streets safer," he said.

Rudolph Porter, leader of the Mayor's Office of Faith and Community Based Initiatives, met with some of the Guardian Angels a few weeks ago. Misty Skipper, press secretary for Mayor John Peyton, said the office "certainly is supportive" of groups like the Guardian Angels. Lauri-Ellen Smith, special assistant to Sheriff John Rutherford, said the Sheriff's Office plans to meet with members and discuss how they can help each other.

Zay said once the group gets formed, it wants to be proactive, just like when he chased down the man who was arrested for fleeing police after running two stop signs.

"When we do what we got to do, we make sure to make a crater instead of a dent," he said.

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This story can be found on Jacksonville.com at [http://www.jacksonville.com/tu-online/stories/092007/met\\_201189585.shtml](http://www.jacksonville.com/tu-online/stories/092007/met_201189585.shtml).

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