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Guardian Angels founder meets with recruits

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SPRINGFIELD - Guardian Angels founder Curtis Sliwa told a group of recruits last night that it takes more than the trademark red beret and windbreaker to join the safety patrol.

Sliwa, speaking at Lysak's Family Martial Arts and Fitness Center, 1490 Allen St., said the jacket and beret come at the end of an elaborate training process that emphasizes self-defense, basic first aid, communication skills and teamwork.

"We don't just give out red berets and red satin jackets," he said.

The organization has a 236-page training manual, and only after recruits demonstrate proficiency in all areas are they allowed to go on the streets, he said.

The meeting last night was attended by five recruits, three men and two women.

John A. Lysak, the local liaison for the Guardian Angels, said 20 people have enlisted and begun training, including himself.

Lysak, 28, also a candidate for city council, said he anticipates the first patrols by November.

His brother Walter Lysak, owner of the karate studio, will provide self-defense training to members.

Sliwa said the Springfield chapter would be aided in its initial steps by members of the Boston chapter.

The Boston group was formed last year and patrols primarily Dorchester and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority subway and bus terminals, Sliwa said.

The Guardian Angels was formed with 13 people in New York in 1979. Initially considered vigilantes and criminals by New York authorities, the group has since expanded to 200 chapters in nine countries, Sliwa said.

"I was arrested 76 times in two years," Sliwa said. "The police truly didn't believe that we were out there to

help people."

In comparison, the Springfield Police Department has agreed to conduct background checks on its recruits and to provide training in legal issues.

Police Commissioner Edward A. Flynn has previously said the chapter will have support of the department as long as its members do not overstep their bounds and try to act as police officers.

Sliwa said one of the reasons the organization stresses training is because one member acting badly will reflect on all members.

"Out of thousands of citizens arrests and tens of thousands of fights we've broken up, we've never been sued," he said.

One of the recruits, 20-year-old Springfield native Joseph Chouinard, said he wanted to join because he is interested in becoming a police officer.

Majoring in criminal justice at Westfield State College, Chouinard said he researched the Guardian Angels for a paper and became interested in their work. "The cops can't do everything," he said.

Lysak said anyone interested in volunteering with the Springfield chapter may call him at (413) 265-3590 or by e-mail at votelysak@yahoo.com.

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