

Angels, Edgewood Patrol Target Landlords

by Paul Bass | October 29, 2007 4:47 PM



They marched on Walgreens until they got a nicer new store. They took up arms and got more police patrols, and a drop in crime. Now Edgewood's rabbi-led "defense patrol" is taking on a new target: absentee landlords they say are running down the neighborhood.

Patrol organizer Eli Greer and his sidekick, national Guardian Angels founder Curtis Sliwa (pictured from right to left), announced the new campaign Monday outside the police substation on Whalley Avenue. They promised to use publicity and patrols to pressure slumlords and the johns and drug-buyers frequenting their properties. And Sliwa promised to "take down" criminals at the properties with citizen arrests.

The pair identified one building in particular, 255 Ellsworth Ave., and its Meriden-based owner as their first target.

Meanwhile, city officials, including the neighborhood's top cop, described the landlord as responsible and cooperative in efforts to fight blight and crime.

"Day of Reckoning"

Greer and Sliwa blasted the building owner, Christine Bonito, at the press conference unveiling their plans. Greer said his group had repeatedly written to Bonito and called her to complain about continual drug-dealing and prostitution at the multi-family property, to no avail.

He displayed a picture of the property along with Bonito's name and the Meriden address of the limited liability corporation, Angel from Above, through which she owns it.

"This property has been a constant nuisance in this neighborhood," he declared. "Her day of reckoning has come."

Greer said his group has a list of "six to eight" other "slumlords" it plans to target if they don't take responsibility for crimes committed by tenants. He said a message is going out to these landlords: "Take control of your property or don't be a landlord... You're the landlord. You milk it. You get the rent checks. You're responsible for who lives there, who hangs around your property."

When Greer was a kid, back in the 1990s, Rabbi Daniel Greer, organized a similar neighborhood group that targeted prostitution by posting flyers with names and addresses of "Johns of the Week" who drove into Edgewood to patronize prostitutes.

In "ratcheting up" their efforts now, Eli Greer said, his Edgewood Park Defense Patrol would similarly expose both johns and landlords to public shame. They would also use the "sheer physical presence" of the armed citizen patrols they formed, along with Guardian Angels patrols, to keep deter criminal behavior.

Curtis Sliwa of the Guardian Angels vowed that, when his patrols see people leaving the building after buying drugs, "We will not hesitate to take them down, put the drugs out in the street, call the police, and make a citizen's arrest."

How will they avoid grabbing people on innocent visits to the building?

Through their "street smarts," Sliwa said. He also said the Guardian Angels have been watching the building, gathering intelligence on who goes there and why.

The Latest Step

Bonito's property is across the street from the Whalley Walgreens, where Greer-organized neighborhoods picketed to demand cleaner conditions. The company ended up agreeing to tear down its store and build a new one. It consulted with the neighborhood and agreed to use brick instead of stucco facing. The store is under construction.

The building is also in the Elm-Edgewood neighborhood, where the Greer family runs a yeshiva in the neighborhood and owns many properties (including one next door Bonito's). In June the Greers made national news by forming their armed citizens patrol in reaction to rising crime.

They came under criticism for the guns. But they also won increased police patrols. They drew the Guardian Angels to town to form their own, unarmed, citizens patrol to work in concert with the group; the Angels graduated a class of New Haven recruits on Sunday.

Greer claimed crime has dropped 50 to 55 percent from a year ago in the neighborhood. Mayoral spokeswoman Jessica Mayorga said the city doesn't have a statistical breakdown for Elm-Edgewood. Crime has indeed dropped there, as it has throughout the city, she said, adding that the drop cannot be attributed to the work of any one group.

Both Greer and Sliwa called their new landlord campaign a logical next step in their joint efforts to clean up the historic, racially diverse, Victorian-lined streets around Edgewood Park. Sliwa grouped Bonito among absentee landlords who "throw nickels around like manhole covers who just care if the check or the cash clears at the end of the month and don't give jack diddly squat ... whatsoever who the tenants are... The building will be shut down."

"A Nice Girl"

To Sgt. Stephen Shea, district manager at the Edgewood/Whalley police substation, Christine Bonito is precisely the kind of landlord he wants to see in the neighborhood.

He said "only recently" did complaints start surfacing about criminal activity at the building. He said the problem stems from some problem tenants. Bonito has worked closely with the cops, according to Shea, to address the problems. She signed up for "Light the Night," a program to keep bright lights outside her property all night. She has begun evicting problem tenants, too, he said. That process takes time.

Bonito herself failed to return repeated phone messages left with Shoreline Property Management, the Meriden company whose number is listed at the building. Nor did Cheryl Wilcox, her attorney in two pending eviction cases, return a call by press time.

"She's been responsive," Shea said of Bonito. "It's good. We have to work together. She's a nice girl. She's at that property at least two, three times a week. She's in contact with me regularly about what steps we can take to eradicate problems."

Mayoral spokeswoman Mayorga also said Bonito has been cooperative with building inspectors. Her building has two subsidized Section 8 apartments. The city inspected them recently, according to Mayorga; one apartment passed, one failed. "We are receiving cooperation" from Bonito as she prepares for a Nov. 9 reinspection, Mayorga said. She said the city has no housing code violations or overcrowding complaints on record at the property.



John Zeng (pictured), owner of A-1 Oriental Kitchen, rents a first-floor Whalley storefront from Bonito; the store is attached to the apartment building. he said she's been a good landlord.



This man, who identified himself as the building's superintendent, also praised her. He didn't give his name. He comes to the building Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, he said. "I just clean and go. I don't know what they do around here. I just keep it clean."