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Wilkes-Barre Guardian Angels have completed training and are ready for patrol

1:57 AM

Angels to hit the streets

By [Steve Mocarskymocarsky@timesleader.com](mailto:Steve.Mocarskymocarsky@timesleader.com)
Staff Writer

WILKES-BARRE – Ten new angels got their wings on Sunday.



Julius Zuckerwar pins the Guardian Angel crest on his beret after graduating into the Wilkes-Barre chapter's Safety Patrol on Sunday at the American Dojo Karate School in Wilkes-Barre.

AIMEE DILGER/THE TIMES LEADER

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And Wilkes-Barre became the 104th city in the nation to graduate a class of Guardian Angels – the 29-year-old organization whose red beret-wearing volunteers safeguard streets, subways and other public areas from dusk until dawn, without weapons.

“I salute the friends, family and relatives of our graduates today who are allowing them to come forward, risk their lives at no pay and no compensation, volunteering their time to be visual deterrents and positive role models in their community, who are going to make a difference,” said Guardian Angels founder Curtis Sliwa.

Sliwa opened the graduation program at the American Dojo Karate School, on South Main Street, by telling guests about the volunteer street patrol and why more and more chapters are forming across the country.

Sliwa said the organization last week graduated a class of new recruits in Millville, N.J., because of increased gang problems, related home invasions and burglary problems he associated with criminals migrating from Philadelphia, Camden, N.J., and Trenton, N.J., communities.

“They’ve begun organizing young people into gangs, into Bloods and Crips and Latin Kings and the kinds of organizations that never before existed there. For them, this is a tremendous trauma to what was for many of their residents Leave-it-to-Beaver-land. ... It’s very similar to what you’re experiencing here in Wilkes-Barre and a number of other communities in the surrounding area,” Sliwa said.

“Do you stay in denial in Wilkes-Barre and say, well, it’ll pass us right over? Every freakin’ interstate in the world cross-sections in your part of the area. If they’re not coming in from Trenton, they’re coming in from Philly, they’re coming in from New York, they’re coming in from Baltimore,” Sliwa said.

“It’s one-stop shopping and you have to be aware that potentially all it takes is one or two or three or four outside forces to set up shop and then boom. Once they start recruiting your young people ... into drugs, crime and gangsterism, it doesn’t take that much to set off a crime wave that suddenly impacts on your quality of life, and suddenly turns a community in which you never before put locks on your doors and bars on your windows and turns your French poodle into a pit bull,” Sliwa said.

“Many of you as residents and supporters of this Guardian Angel effort have understood that, you’ve seen the beginnings of a change. ... You want to launch a preemptive strike and I salute all of you for that,” he said.

“So whether you’re the mayor of Wilkes-Barre and in denial or whether you’re the police chief and in denial, or any of these other places that say we’re not New York, we’re not Chester, we’re not Camden, we’re not Philly, we’re not Trenton, we’re not Baltimore,” hey, you’re not. But you better do something to make sure you don’t become at least part of that or a small piece of that,” Sliwa said.

To date, neither Mayor Tom Leighton nor police Chief Gerry Dessoie have taken a public stand – positive or negative – regarding the Angels. They and council were invited to the graduation ceremony, but their reserved seats were empty and they did not respond to the invitation, said Wilkes-Barre chapter leader Scott Koppenhofer.

Leighton did not return a call seeking comment, and Dessoie could not be reached.

Sliwa saluted the Wilkes-Barre Crime Watch for being “the first group to reach out in solidarity” to the Angels “in defiance of the mayor and police chief.”

He thanked Koppenhofer, of Kingston, for his work to establish the chapter and commended him for his commitment to making the city as safe as possible “unlike some people whose only sense of consciousness is development and redevelopment of downtown quarters.”

“If you don’t have public safety, you could build brand new bus shelters, you can have state of the art lighting, you could encourage businesses to come back from the malls and ... give them tax breaks and abatements that would almost make it fit for them fiscally to come back, but guess what. If their customers are getting mugged, if their cars are getting broken into, if their businesses are being vandalized, why would they *want* to come back to the inner city core as part of the redevelopment scheme?” Sliwa said.

Koppenhofer joined the Angels in 1989 while he was in the Navy stationed in San Diego, Calif., and spent his leaves volunteering there when “Bloods and Crips were doing drive-by shootings, there

were all these crazy illegals coming across the border and forming gangs. ... They were basically changing the landscape of what was once considered a very safe city," Sliwa said.

Koppenhofer thanked members of the Slate Belt chapter for coming to show their support, as well as new Angel graduates Stephanie Sawchak and Bridget Morrissey, who co-own the karate studio in which the graduation occurred.

Sawchak and Morrissey, both of Scranton, also have a studio in that city, and Morrissey plans to help organize and lead a chapter there in the near future.

All of the graduates received pins for their berets, a Guardian Angels shirt, a program booklet and a certificate acknowledging their successful completion of three months of training in patrol technique, self-defense, CPR, first aid and the law.

Graduate Eric Triani, 39, of Wilkes-Barre, said he became interested in joining the Angels after watching an interview with Sliwa on WVIA-TV Channel 44.

"I've lived here my whole life, and things have just gotten worse and worse. Everybody needs to do something. If I don't do my part, I can't be one of the ones who complain.

Eric's girlfriend, Kathy Tirpak, of Wilkes-Barre, said she's "worried a little," but very proud.


"The city has changed, and I'm proud they're going out there and trying to make it safer," she said.

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To find out more about joining the Guardian Angels, call Scott Koppenhofer at (484) 788-1425 or Jason Weston, who will take over as Wilkes-Barre chapter leader as Koppenhofer begins working to establish other chapters in the region, at (267) 614-0464. Or e-mail: skoppy2002@aol.com or jawz5555@yahoo.com, respectively.

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