

Guardian Angels watching over Halifax

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Halifax residents got a guardian angel on Saturday. Actually, eight of them, all sporting red shirts and berets and an attitude that says we can make our city a safer place.

Fred Folz is the 49-year-old organizer of the volunteer crime-fighting group Guardian Angels' Halifax chapter - five men and three women who'll walk the city's streets for the first time early this morning.

"Halifax has always been a small city, always been a good city. I think it's just gone wild for whatever reason. I want to see Halifax back the way it was," he said Saturday shortly after the eight Angels got their wings in a graduation ceremony overseen by the founder of the New York-based organization, Curtis Sliwa.

During the Angels' patrol, in downtown Halifax's "pizza corner," they'll be watching out for people in trouble.

There's often no shortage of that on the corner, a late-night gathering place near the bar strip with a reputation for being a rough area.

They'll also patrol the Halifax Commons, a large park in the centre of the city where the assault of an elderly woman by three teens armed with metal table legs last year prompted the formation of the Halifax chapter.

"Everybody deserves the right, whether they want to go for a walk at two o'clock in the afternoon or two o'clock in the morning, they should have that right to do it without having to be beat up on the commons with table legs by young offenders," Folz said. "And they get slapped on the wrist for what they did."

The Angels patrol comes a couple of days after the release of a city-commissioned report on violence in Halifax.

The report by Dalhousie University criminologist Don Clairmont actually found the violent crime rate has declined in the city, despite the public perception that it has gotten worse.

Folz hadn't read the report Saturday, but he had no doubt that the crime rate has worsened, fuelled in part by the court system not being tough enough on young offenders.

"They're more brazen, they're more open. It's like 'Who's going to touch us? Who's going to bother us? Who's going to step in? We can do what we want when we want to do it.' . . . Of course it's 2008 now and not 1968, but it shouldn't be the way it is."

The city's mayor and police chief have refused to endorse the chapter, saying the authorities are the ones who should be policing the city's streets.

Halifax police said last week while they don't condone the group's willingness to get into confrontations, as long as they behave within the law, police have no problem with them.

Folz said they're not trying to replace the police, but instead to augment what they do.

"We're just trying to make it a safer place. I know the police are strapped. There's a lot of frustration there," he said.

Folz, meanwhile, hopes the patrol will be greeted positively by Haligonians and that they pick up more recruits as they continue.

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