

First patrol draws mixed reactions

Paul McLeod, Metro Halifax
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If anyone knows downtown Halifax at night, it's Caesar.

Gary "Caesar" Julien is a popular street musician who plays outside the Dome nightclub every weekend. He has seen a renaissance in the last six months. He says the increased police presence has transformed the downtown from a Wild West environment to friendlier place.

"Since Christmas things have changed drastically for the better. It was black, now it's white," said Julien. "The police have changed their attitudes. They talk to the people more. They're smiling now. Before they weren't smiling."

But there's always some trouble, and that's why he was happy to see the Guardian Angels on their first patrol Saturday night. The more eyes looking out for people the better, he figures.

That's what Curtis Sliwa is hoping for. Sliwa led the freshly graduated Halifax patrol Saturday night as it walked around the downtown core, aiming to keep the peace. The New York-based Angels founder said Halifax is unique because of its compact bar district and central hot spots like pizza corner.

As Sliwa and the new Halifax Angels — five men and three women ranging in age from 18 to 49 — walked around, the reaction from bar-goers was largely enthusiastic.

"You guys need to be here," said one woman eating pizza.

"If they stop one crime it's worth it," said 24-year-old Greg Branton. "If they stop one person from getting raped or robbed, then it's worth it, no matter all of that other (controversy)."

Many people stopped to shake hands with the Angels. A couple men openly joked with them, but left once police officers got close. The police were friendly with the Angels, sharing pointers throughout the night, even though police Chief Frank Beazley opposes the group setting up in Halifax.

But others were skeptical. One bar-goer referred to them as "mall police" while another dismissed them as "basically an organized gang."

Others said the Angels were too old or small to maintain the peace.

"If I'm getting beaten up what's that four-foot girl going to be able to do?" said one passerby.

The Angels said they were encouraged with their reception. As their night ended without incident, they all said they plan to keep coming out.

"I got bullied a bit in junior high, so I was always worried walking home. Nobody should really have to feel worried and look over their shoulder like that. So I thought this was a way I could help out and make people feel safer," said Brandon, who did not give his last name for safety reasons. Brandon, who is the youngest Angel at 18 years old, is also a Citadel High student.

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The Guardian Angels made their debut in downtown Halifax over the weekend