 Click to Print[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Monday, June 16, 2008

Guardian Angels back in Detroit

Controversial citizen patrollers return to help fight city's crime

Santiago Esparza / The Detroit News

DETROIT -- The Guardian Angels are back -- more than 20 years after politicians, police officials and political infighting chased the citizen crime fighters out of the city.

The Toledo chapter of the international neighborhood patrol organization has been meeting quietly on Saturdays at the Motor City Resource Center near Six Mile and Lahser in northwest Detroit, signing up recruits and helping Motor City Blight Busters with cleanup projects. The Guardians say they have about a dozen Detroit members.

The Toledo chapter is guiding Detroit's fledgling unit until members are able to run their own chapter.

"We are not coming into anyone's community and saying, 'This is how we run things,' " said 39-year-old Aaron Brillbeck, a member of the Toledo chapter. "We just want to help get things moving."

Violent crime in Detroit fell 8 percent last year, according to the FBI. But with 19,683 such crimes, there is plenty to be done, Guardian Angels officials said.

"The people of Detroit need to take back their city," said 22-year-old Detroiter Kristian Edwards, who is taking Angels training.

There are at least 80 chapters of the Guardian Angels in the United States, and nearly 60 in other countries. The organization has operated the CyberAngels since 1995, dedicated to protecting young people on the Internet.

The Guardian Angels are not always welcome by city or police officials. The nonprofit recently started chapters in Salt Lake City and in the Canadian cities of Moncton and Halifax, despite some opposition, according to published reports.

In the early 1980s, in his trademark red jacket and beret, Angels founder Curtis Sliwa came to Detroit full of brash talk and the bravado that helped him propel the group from a 13-member citizens patrol in New York City into an international movement.

But when he came to Detroit, then-Mayor Coleman A. Young did not take kindly to Sliwa's assertions he could do a better job of ridding Detroit of crime than Detroit cops could. Young's police chief, William Hart, threatened to jail Sliwa and his cohorts.

Then Detroit City Councilman John Peoples questioned the Guardian Angels' true purpose. Sliwa refused to back down and went ahead with training people to patrol neighborhoods.

But by the mid-1980s, the organization disbanded as members bickered over where they would patrol. The resurgent Detroit chapter is partnering with Motor City Blight Busters and attempting to set up a chapter on the northwest side. The Blight Busters is well-established and well-known for its neighborhood improvement efforts in Detroit.

Organizers say they are investigating recruits' background for felony arrests and violent brushes with the law that make them unsuitable candidates for patrol. In addition, prospective patrollers undergo basic martial arts training -- blocking punches and subduing suspects.

Blight Busters founder John George said he agreed to help the Guardian Angels in Detroit at the request of City Council President Ken Cockrel Jr.

"For many years, the Guardian Angels had a dream of setting up a chapter in Detroit," George said. "We are not trying to replace the police. We look at it as another set of eyes."

Brilbeck added: "It is difficult getting volunteers. We are not asking for money. Let us help you make this a better city."

Cockrel invited the Angels to return to Detroit about two years ago. He said he would like the group and the city to draft a memorandum of understanding, so patrollers know their mission, and the city approves of it.

"If there is a memorandum from the city, it more or less gives them a blessing," Cockrel said. "In the case of crime prevention and crime fighting, there is no such thing as too much of a good thing."

When asked for comment, Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick's office said Detroiters should get involved in their neighborhoods, but did not address whether it favors the Guardian Angels' return to the city.

The Detroit Police Department referred The News to the Mayor's Office for comment.

Marsha Kay Ponkey tried unsuccessfully to get a Detroit chapter in recent years. A Grosse Pointe, Ponkey has gone on Guardian Angels patrols in New York City and other areas. She believes they can make a difference, and hopes the Toledo chapter can help Detroit grow its own.


Ponkey agrees that the group needs to work with police and city officials to be effective.

"We are much more effective as an organization with the backing of the police," she said. "We can be the eyes and the ears in the neighborhoods."

You can reach Santiago Esparza at (313) 222-2127 or sesparza@detnews.com.

Find this article at:

<http://www.detnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080616/metro/806160383>

 **Click to Print**

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

© Copyright 2008 The Detroit News. All rights reserved.