

Hazleton may soon have Guardian Angels watching



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Sometimes just planting a seed – or, in Ignacio Beato's case, a tomato plant – can open the door to a safer community.

Beato, vice president of the Concerned Parents of the Hazleton Area, said he came to Hazleton five years ago “and I fell in love with this city.”

He said it was a quiet, good community to raise a family in. Beato and his neighbors didn't speak for two to three months after he moved to town.

All that changed, Beato said, when he said hello to them. “Now we are great friends,” he continued.

His neighbors taught him how to plant tomatoes and he helps them take out their garbage. They know each other and who belongs and who does not belong in their neighborhood.

Good people in Hazleton from different sectors of society, Beato said, need to “get together,” to protect one another and their families from crime.

“We want to be a great family in a small city ... that we can be true friends,” he said.

“I dream of a united city working together for the betterment of Hazleton.”

Beato, like others in the concerned parents group, hopes a new organization made up of angels donning red berets with harvested and cultivated crime-detering skills will help the good people band together to combat crime.

The parents group sponsored a program that explained the organization Guardian Angels on Saturday afternoon at the Crystal Barbeque, East Broad Street, Hazleton. City residents Craig and Vilma Budde introduced the idea of starting a Guardian Angels chapter in Hazleton.

Scott Koppenhofer, a Guardian Angels alumni member, works as an adviser in setting up new chapters. He grew up in the Exeter and Wyoming area, where everyone knew each other.

“And I think we've lost that in a lot of communities now,” he said. Knowing your neighbors, he said, can be a useful tool to chase criminals out of town.

Koppenhofer gave an overview of the organization, noting its formation in 1979 in New York.

He said the original members patrolled the No. 4 train, what was known as “muggers express,” in New York. In the first year a study of the crime rate was issued and it showed crime was up except on “muggers express,” where the rate dropped.

The group's target area was a success. Now known as the Guardian Angels, the group has expanded.

“Basically we know we can make a difference,” Koppenhofer said.

He joined the group in 1987 when he was serving in the Navy in San Diego.

While patrols are Guardian Angels' core response to crime, the group also has outreach programs such as aiding schools to combat bullying and educating and protecting people from Internet crime.

Gangs in the Hazleton area are targeting children by glorifying what they do, Koppenhofer said. “... Children are being grabbed by gang members at a young age now. We want to get to them first,” he said.

Cyber Angels, Koppenhofer said, was established in 1995 to combat Internet crimes. Among other things, it works to stop pedophiles from reaching children.

The Guardian Angels has more than 105 chapter's worldwide, he said, with about 5,000 members.

“Hazleton is not any different from other communities,” Koppenhofer said. Communities are seeing an increase in crime and people are needed to stop it. “They take advantage of people like you,” he said of criminals.

Citizens, he said, have to become a “nuisance” to criminals.

The Wilkes-Barre chapter of the Guardian Angels graduated training in May and is now an official organization. A chapter in Stroudsburg is undergoing training and another chapter in Scranton is working on recruitment.

A minimum of four people is needed to establish a chapter. Four applications were handed out Saturday in Hazleton.

Training is done in the area and lasts 12 weeks. Angels are trained in hostile conflict resolution, how to interact with the public positively, patrol procedures, the history and philosophy of the angels, CPR and first aid.

About 15 people attended the meeting.

“I know there's more people that care out there,” Koppenhofer said while looking through the empty seats at the restaurant. He said the group would continue to recruit people to join.

Koppenhofer said the Guardian Angels in Hazleton would grow as residents become more familiar with the organization. “It just takes time,” he said.

Anita Stone of the West Hazleton Crime Watch attended and said she felt those organizations in the area would only be strengthened by the presence of Guardian Angels.

Stone said that hopefully the group will grow, spark public interest and work with Crime Watch.

Bunnie Veet of Hazleton said she believes the group will help combat crime. She, too, hoped the group would bring the good people in the area together.

The Buddes thanked the crowd for their support.

“We want to be able to live in a better community,” Vilma said.

“They (Guardian Angels) help a lot of people,” Craig said. “We don't want drug dealers or gang members here.”

Gangs, he said, will say they have strength in numbers, and the good people in the area should be able to say the same.

“Once they know they're being watched, they'll leave,” Craig said.

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