

## Guardian Angels look to kick-start efforts

Martial arts program for teens is the hope of the Jacksonville chapter.

BY JOSH SALMAN | STORY UPDATED AT 6:25 AM ON WEDNESDAY, JUL. 1, 2009



BRUCE LIPSKY/The Times-Union  
Ruben Torres, the Guardian Angels' president for the latest Jacksonville chapter, said he hopes the new gym program will help fight negative impressions of the Angels as vigilantes.

### The Guardian Angels

To sign up for the Guardian Angels martial arts program or volunteer with the organization, call (904) 994-4248 or stop by the gym's grand opening today through Friday at 8116 Old Kings Road South, Jacksonville.



They roam the streets at night wearing military-like uniforms and red berets. The only weapons they carry are their fists and a sense of community. Some call their tactics vigilante, others see them as gatekeepers.

And they're bringing their grass-roots, anti-crime approach to Northeast Florida with plans of cutting gang activity at the source: teenagers.

The Guardian Angels have resurfaced in Jacksonville and are opening a mixed martial arts gym on Old Kings Road South in the San Jose-Brierwood area. The goal of the center is to keep at-risk teenagers off the streets while teaching karate, kick boxing and Muay Thai, said Jacksonville resident Ruben Torres, the Guardian Angels chapter president and gym co-founder.

The organization will train teens on mixed martial arts while teaching them about the dangers of drugs and gangs. The new gym will also be open to the public and serve as the chapter's home base, Torres said.

"We started noticing crime in Jacksonville rising and wanted to help out," he said. "This is about keeping kids on the right track."

A local Angels chapter has come in and out of existence on multiple occasions during the past few years, but this time the organization's seven members said they are here to stay and plan to grow.

This is the first time the organization will sponsor youth programs, but it's the organization's night watches that have gained attention, both positive and negative.

During their walks, the Angels roam high-crime communities in Jacksonville including the Westside, Northside and Springfield. Trained in a variety of martial arts, they monitor bus stations, parking lots, churches, low income housing and other areas where gang activity has been reported.

The current Angels have been out for a few months now and while their walks have been infrequent, they hope to increase them as membership grows.

They don't carry weapons and use force only when necessary, mostly calling on the police when they see something off. But unlike neighborhood watch, the Angels won't hesitate to make a citizen's arrest, Torres said.

"We're not vigilantes," he said. "We just try to be the eyes and ears of the police while setting good examples for the kids."

Torres said the organization will work closely with the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office. But Lauri-Ellen Smith, the sheriff's assistant, refused to comment on the Angels or say if police would be working with the group in any way.

Other community organizations also have mixed reactions to the Angels' presence.

Eddie Staton of Jacksonville's MAD DADS anti-crime group said any burden that can be taken off police will go a long way in reducing Jacksonville's crime problem.

"Any citizens that are willing to stand up and fight the issues of crime is a good thing," Staton said. "They operate as vigilantes, and I don't agree with all of their tactics, but it gives us a sense of community, and that's what Jacksonville needs."

Critics say a tendency to intervene leaves Angels open to charges of provoking as much crime as they stop. The group's national Web site lists six members who have been killed in the "line of duty."

"We have to leave policing to the trained officers, so it's important [the Angels] work in concert with the Sheriff's Office. If they're not, it could create more problems than we already have," said the Rev. Mark Griffin of Wayman Ministries, which is located across the street from Eureka Garden Apartments, a high-crime neighborhood the Angels said they intend to patrol.

Members of the Springfield Preservation and Revitalization Council don't want the Angels in their neighborhood. The community has improved the crime rate during the past few years, and residents fear the Angels will undo the work, said Louise Despain, executive director of the Springfield council.

"Most of the people in this neighborhood would not welcome them into the community," she said. "We don't want anything that doesn't have total cooperation with the Sheriff's Office. And for them to assume they need to be here is insulting."

While some residents and community leaders disagree with the group's methods, the Angels have chapters in more than 85 communities worldwide including regional chapters in Orlando and Savannah. Torres said he hopes the Angels' new gym and teen program will alleviate many of the negative perceptions.

The Angels will have a grand opening at the facility today through Friday. The group will be running workshops on the dangers of gangs and drugs, and giving tours of the facility.

Martial arts classes will run daily from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m., with a children's summer program from noon to 6 p.m. The fee is \$75 per month, but no teen will be turned away for their inability to pay, Torres said.

"It's really just about teaching kids to defend themselves while building confidence," said Lisa Lind, another Angel and gym co-founder. "We want to show them the alternatives to being on the streets."

Lind said she hopes the facility will draw members, allowing the chapter to succeed unlike previous attempts and extend neighborhood walks to daytime hours. Long-term, the Guardian Angels want to expand and open centers in other areas of Jacksonville.

josh.salman@jacksonville.com, (904) 359-4351

