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'Guardian Angels' want to help keep Fond du Lac safe

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Guardian Angels have landed in Fond du Lac.

Local resident Joseph Ferrer said he is a supporter of the Guardian Angels — a volunteer organization of crime patrollers — and is serving as the local chapter leader.

Ferrer said he is a former resident of Illinois and was supportive of Chicago's alternative policing strategy.

"(The Guardian Angels) is interactivism. Activists and community watch programs sit back, they have their little meetings and they talk about what should be done, but they never do anything," Ferrer said. "The difference is we are going to go out and actually do something."

Ferrer, who has lived in Fond du Lac for two years, already has more than 10 people interested in patrolling the streets and assisting the Fond du Lac Police Department with watching over the Hamilton Area Neighborhood District.

"Ever since I saw that in the paper — a need for a change after the drive-by shooting — I said, 'If somebody doesn't do something, who is going to do something?'" Ferrer said. "The cops can't do it by themselves. I decided to roll up my sleeves, put my feet on the ground, and help out and do what I can do."

About 4:30 p.m. June 10, Terrence T. Whitaker, 20, of 403D N. Peters Ave., allegedly shot from the car window at a group of people in front of Calumet Apartments, 68 Harrison Place, according to a criminal complaint.

Nobody was injured in the shooting, but four bullets struck a car nearby containing two children, their mother and a man.

While the Whitaker case works its way through the court system, Ferrer is recruiting members of the community to hit the streets unarmed to report acts of violence, open-air drug dealings and other crimes the Police Department has cracked down on since the drive-by shooting.

The first steps

Guardian Angels sporting their signature red berets are typically seen in large cities like Milwaukee and New Orleans. Ferrer said the size of Fond du Lac does not affect the need for patrol.

"Where there's drugs, there's crime; where there's crime, there's drugs. It's rampant in (the HAND) area," Ferrer said. "Right now, we are focused in this area."

On Thursday, Fond du Lac Police Department Capt. Steve Klein met with Ferrer, Jason Costa, Guardian Angels director of operations in Wisconsin; and Rafael Solorio, Guardian Angels fitness

instructor in Green Bay.

"It was a good meeting," Klein said. "Basically, at this point, it's still in its infancy stages of trying to develop a local chapter. As we talked with the members, ... they stated that's it's crucial when establishing a Guardian Angels chapter to have the community support and the support of the people living in the area they would be in."

Klein added that the Police Department would run background checks on members, which is a policy of the Guardian Angels organization.

"There is still some work to be done before we start seeing the Guardian Angels on the streets of Fond du Lac," he said.

Planning patrol

When crime decreases in the HAND area and more people volunteer, the Guardian Angels will move into other parts of Fond du Lac, Ferrer said.

Ferrer has already contacted the YMCA about starting youth programs for residents of the HAND area.

"We are trying to recruit the people on the edge, the young people and the teenagers, that maybe hang out with some of the drug dealers and the gang-bangers that don't know which way they are going to go," Ferrer said. "We are trying to swing them towards our side, trying to (get them to) help out instead of bring down their neighborhood."

Chris Tennis, of Pine River, said he is concerned about the increase of drug use and violence in the HAND area. He pointed out that Fond du Lac is in a direct line with Chicago, Milwaukee and Green Bay, making the area a potential hotbed for drugs.

"I was brought up (in Fond du Lac). I've been concerned with the growing amount of crime," Tennis said. "... I don't want my 78-year-old mother running into problems in this town that maybe a community watch can help stop."

Justin Cobb, who lives on Sophia Street with Ferrer, his stepfather, said he just wants to help.

"There are a lot of bad things happening. If we can help to improve it, let's do it," Cobb said.

Klein added, "It does take a community effort to combat some of the issues that we have in the HAND area — the open-air drug dealing and things like that. The Police Department can't always be everywhere all the time. We do rely on the people of the community to be our eyes and ears."

Keeping the peace

Ferrer said the Guardian Angels will not accept vigilante members. Anyone who violates the law to keep the peace will be reported, he said.

"We're not going to take matters into our own hands. We're not going to be the police or try to be the police," Ferrer said. "We have a contact officer, and we will be helping out and assisting them."

Ferrer said he witnessed crime spreading when he lived in the Chicago area and added that he has seen alcohol and drug use in Hamilton Park.

"If nobody does something about it and nips it in the bud, it's starts to grow and expands out," Ferrer said. "It won't just be (the HAND) area."
