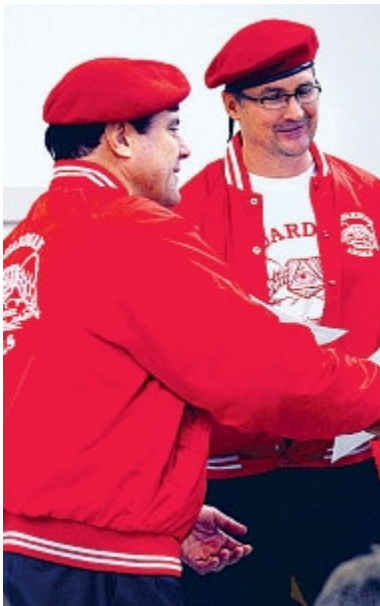


Guardian Angels are friends to strangers, not uniformed brawlers

Local chapter feeling squeeze on streets from lack of volunteers

By Scott Mckeen, Edmonton Journal August 10, 2009



Guardian Angel chapter leader Dave Schroeder, right, and founder Curtis Sliwa, left, shake hands during a graduation ceremony of local Angels in September.

Photograph by: John Lucas, The Journal, Edmonton Journal

Dave Schroeder walks softly and carries a big smile.

The head of Edmonton's Guardian Angels is no thug or adrenalin junkie. He is a realtor. He volunteers on charity boards.

He spent much of the weekend at the Folk Festival, of all things. To say that Schroder defies my image of Guardian Angels' stock is an understatement.

It is also a pleasant surprise. Like most people, I need my myths and prejudices confronted.

I long believed the Angels were organized, uniformed brawlers --men who craved a bit of knuckle and punch.

I interviewed Curtis Sliwa, the founder of the Guardian Angels, years ago. I thought he was too brash and cocky by half.

Yet I was a young man, probably too brash and cocky by three quarters. Age and experience slows the reflexes, even those that form snarky first impressions.

The impression I'm forming of Dave Schroder today is a good one. He's a nice man. A gentle man. A man engaged in his community.

He says he was bullied as a kid. Like many of us who experienced bullying, he wondered why his friends didn't step in to help.

Years later, as a 20-year-old, he got jumped leaving a party and was kicked and stamped by four drunken thugs.

He believes strongly that friends must help friends, especially when friends are about to do something they'd regret, like driving drunk or starting a drunken brawl.

Schroder tells of a time when the Angels were walking down Whyte Avenue and broke up a fight just before it started. The belligerent one later pulled a knife on a crowd of motorcyclists. The Angels informed the police.

Schroder's attitude to crime prevention is to call the cops and let them do the arrest. The Angels, he says, are eyes on the street and friends to strangers.

Yes, they have basic martial arts training. Yes, they will intervene in a fight or assault. They will hold a criminal until police arrive. But it is not in their interests to go all Kung Fu on some street thug's butt.

"I take very seriously the position I'm in," says Schroder. "I'd not be part of this if it was about going out and busting heads.

"I just feel that people who are capable of helping in some way have an obligation to make our community safer."

We all have that responsibility, he says. It can be as simple as taking the car keys away from a drunken friend, reporting a drug house, or volunteering to coach or mentor kids.

Schroder says his interest in crime prevention began in the summer of 2006, after a number of high-profile street assaults. He phoned the Toronto Angels chapter and eventually talked to Sliwa, who asked him to form a local chapter.

He took on the challenge and graduated a class of new recruits in the fall of 2007.

All new Guardian Angels recruits are subjected to a criminal record check. Schroder says the three-to five-month training program--including CPR and first aid--weeds out any potential hothead.

When the Angels go out on patrols, they notify police of where they'll be walking and for how long. They pat each other down, to ensure no one is carrying anything that could even be perceived as a weapon.

One of the members has a head-mounted video camera to track their encounters.

As far as Schroder knows, no Guardian Angels member in North America has ever been convicted or sued for their actions on the street.

What they have done is upset the dark rhythm of the street. Criminals hate being watched.

"We're realistic about it," says Schroder. "The only difference we can make is where we are at that point in time.

"If we had more people we could be at more places more often."

That's the rub for the Edmonton chapter of the Guardian Angels. Perhaps it is our prejudice, or our apathy to blame.

Whatever the reason, not enough people have stepped up to grow Edmonton's chapter of the Guardian Angels into a going concern.

They say that it takes a community to raise a child. What's also true is that it takes a community to raise crime rates.

Criminal activity reflects, to a large extent, a community's level of fear and apathy, or surrender.

Hiding behind locked doors and leaving the streets to the cops and criminals is a recipe for disaster.

There aren't enough cops. There are far too many bad guys.

The Guardian Angels need a few more good men and women.

smckeen@thejournal.canwest.com

