

Biography special on Guardian Angels could lead to reality series on Curtis Sliwa-founded group

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GUARDIAN ANGELS

Monday night at 10, Biography

If Monday night's Biography special on the Guardian Angels catches the right eyeballs, we could soon have a Guardian Angels "reality" show.

And hey, why not?

It would hardly be the worst entry in the "reality" game.

Monday night's half-hour pilot, placed on Biography by parent network A&E as a test run, follows a squad of red beret-clad Angels to an Atlantic City housing project, where drug dealers are keeping other residents figuratively and literally pinned down.

Curtis Sliwa, the WABC radio host who founded the Angels three decades ago, dispatches the group, stays in phone contact during the "mission" and reappears at the end to reiterate that ultimately it's up to decent people themselves to hold their turf against the bad guys.

While the Angels are civilians, this show follows the familiar formula of past "reality" shows about cops and other law enforcement officials: action scenes intercut with comments from people at the scene, both Angels and a few residents.

The residents include Charmaine, a teenage girl whose call to Sliwa sent the Angels into action in the first place. She takes the camera through her house and points out, among other things, the room to which she retreats when gunfire starts, thus minimizing her chances of getting winged by a stray bullet.

Much of the Angels' narrative comes from two leaders named Unique and Jaguar, who like all Angels work under code names. Both talk a little about why they joined the group and say that despite the constant danger they feel they're doing the right thing.

While Sliwa has always described the group as a citizen patrol, his posture and motives have been attacked often enough that it's no surprise he uses this show to deny the V-word.

"We are not vigilantes," he says, stressing several times that the Angels work with the police, not as a wild-card alternative.

Most police forces, he says, don't have the resources to cover everything or be a constant presence in every neighborhood. The Angels, he says, help fill the void.

They carry no weapons and as Sliwa describes it, have two primary functions: to be a "visual deterrent" and to exercise their legal right to detain suspects until police are summoned.

As this suggests, this show presents a generally approving assessment of the Angels. Anyone seeking a hard look at the group itself, or its often-controversial founder, won't get it here.

As for the Atlantic City operation, there is a bust and the show ends with a mildly upbeat coda, saying crime fell in the three months after the Angels arrived.

But Sliwa and other Angels note that, realistically, there's no quick fix - and that what we've seen is really one small skirmish in America's toughest war.