

Guardian Angels' founder scoping out St. Louis



Guardian Angels Joseph Suchorski, left, and Dov Benson put up flyers Monday calling for volunteers to join the group in the Hyde Park neighborhood of St. Louis. (David Carson/P-D)

By [Kim Bell](#)

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ST. LOUIS -- Abdul "Sam" Samara, who runs a grocery in the city's Hyde Park neighborhood, said drive-by shootings and drug activity are rampant in that pocket of north St. Louis. He has been to 15 funerals in seven years.

"That's too many," Samara says. "They're my customers' kids or my customers. One of the boys got raised in this neighborhood, and I'd known him since he was 8 years old. He was killed one block from my store."

With that reality, Samara greets Guardian Angels' founder Curtis Sliwa as the cavalry of sorts. Samara thinks the volunteer crime-prevention group could do wonders if it took root in that St. Louis neighborhood. The Guardian Angels is a New York-based citizens group that seeks to reduce crime by using unarmed residents to patrol their own communities.

"I hear about them and what they did in New York and Chicago," Samara says. "I was waiting for him for years."

Sliwa, wearing his trademark red beret and Angels jacket, came to town this weekend and walked the same streets Samara has been complaining about for years.

Sliwa came to St. Louis at the request of Terry Goodwin, executive director of Sun Ministries, Inc., a nonprofit based in O'Fallon, Mo., that is planning to relocate to the Hyde Park neighborhood soon. Goodwin's ministry is trying to buy a dilapidated building from the city, catty-corner to Samara's M.V. Market at 20th and Ferry streets. The ministry would tutor children, train adults on new job skills and show them how to develop a small business.

"That neighborhood right now is devastated," Goodwin says. "There's a core group of people who are not willing to give up on it."

Crime there is a huge issue that needs to be addressed, and the Guardian Angels "have the best reputation with that," says Goodwin, who emailed Sliwa a few months ago.

Goodwin is trying to help the Guardian Angels start a St. Louis chapter.

"We need people in St. Louis to step up, put their lives on the line to help the law-abiding citizens live in safety," Goodwin says.

Police officials met with Guardian Angels representatives Monday afternoon. Police spokeswoman Katie O'Sullivan said police officials listened to what the group had to say, but officers need to evaluate the group's plans before the department responds or reacts. No department policy regarding the group has yet been formulated.

The Guardian Angels talked about their plans for St. Louis, and how they have operated in other cities during the meeting, she said.

Over the weekend, the Angels visited with residents in north and south St. Louis.

Sliwa said of St. Louis, "As long as you have people who are willing to get involved and go through the training, we'll come visit."

The three-month training program includes basic self defense, certification in CPR and first aid and some legal training. "Legal training is very important because that's what makes us different from a block watch," Sliwa says. "We will make arrests, break up fights and disputes."

Sliwa said another of the group's focus would be to try to stop the anti-snitch culture. "There's

this whole subculture that says snitches get stitches and end up in ditches. Young men and women don't want to cooperate" on police investigations. "Witnesses all of the sudden have shades on their eyes, zippers on their mouths."

Sliwa said Guardian Angels work within the community to pick up tips to solve crimes and pass those along to police.

In the 1980s, the Guardian Angels had a patrol in the Vaughn housing complex in St. Louis. News reports at the time mentioned some internal bickering among the group, and several left the organization. Some complained that the training was inadequate for the type of crime patrol they were being asked to do in Vaughn.

Sliwa on Monday said of the earlier program: "There was no enthusiasm, no desire to have us in St. Louis."

He said the patrols at the time didn't have the backing they needed.

"We'll be asking to not have a repeat of what happened in the '80s, when we were left on our own in the Vaughn housing project," Sliwa says. "When we made a 911 call back then, it was like, 'Good luck, we'll be there when we get there.'"

Sliwa said he'll be asking the police for their support -- and for a setup similar to what the group has in Washington DC. "In DC, the department there issues us police radios so we're in direct contact with dispatchers and other police officers," Sliwa says. "Two separate police chiefs (in DC) have allowed that."

Sliwa says: "We're going to use the Washington DC effort as an example, and if that is not a possibility in St. Louis, we'll figure out another form of communication whether it's our cell phones or something else."

The Guardian Angels have chapters in Mexico City and Cape Town, South Africa -- "places that at times border on lawlessness," Sliwa says.

How do parts of St. Louis compare?

"St. Louis has some serious problems," Sliwa says. "Gangs intimidate people, Drug dealers rule certain corners. There are bars on windows, and people are very much intimidated."

People who belong to the Guardian Angels carry no weapons, Sliwa says. Everyone gets searched before going onto patrol, he says. "We've had it that way for 30 years," he says. "There's enough weapons out there on the streets. Plus, we're trying to discourage young people to (use) weapons."

The Guardian Angels has patrols in 13 countries and 140 cities, Sliwa says.

"From 1979 to 1993, including the time we were in the Vaughn housing complex in St. Louis,

police and elected officials wanted nothing to do with us," Sliwa says.

In that period, six Guardian Angels were shot and killed while on duty.

In 1993, when Rudy Giuliani was elected mayor of New York, things began to change, and police there and elsewhere started embracing what the Guardian Angels were trying to do, Sliwa said. Since, "we've had zero fatalities and zero major serious injuries" of Guardian Angel members, he said.

Sliwa said Guardian Angels would all be selected from the neighborhoods of St. Louis and trained by experienced members from other cities. It would several months to set up a chapter here, take applications and train people, he said.

St. Louis Alderman Freeman Bosley Sr., whose ward includes the Hyde Park neighborhood, supports Sliwa's group.

"I think it's fantastic," Bosley said. "When the vandals and wrong-doers and drug dealers learn and understand that the Guardian Angels will be walking around the Hyde Park neighborhood, they'll pick some other place to go."

Samara, the grocer at M.V. Market, will be the biggest welcoming party. As it stands, Samara is looking to open another grocer in a safer neighborhood.

"Here, it's completely a drug neighborhood," Samara says. "Every house has drugs in it. Police respond but they say their hands are tied, they can't go inside the house."

After shaking hands with Sliwa on Monday, Samara said: "I'm hopeful."

Patrick O'Connell of the Post-Dispatch contributed to this story.