

Guardian Angels don't fear to tread in the Crest

By Lanz Christian Bañes

Posted: 09/25/2009 01:30:13 AM PDT

Updated: 09/25/2009 01:30:13 AM PDT

Hector Chavez's store has been robbed at least nine times in the three years he's been in the Country Club Crest area of Vallejo.

"Four times this year alone," said Chavez, owner of Guanajuato Grill, Deli and Bakery in the shopping center at Fairgrounds Drive and Taper Avenue.

Chavez did not mince words when describing the crime in the strip mall specifically and in the Crest in general.

"It's bad," he said.

Earlier this year, 19-year-old Damario Watson was gunned down while pumping gas at the station adjacent to the shopping center.

But Chavez said he is pleased by strip mall owner Bishop Pipkin's decision to ask the Solano County Guardian Angels to watch over the shopping center.

"They're here ... so we feel 100 percent safe," Chavez said.

It's been a month since the volunteer patrol group Guardian Angels has started walking the area. Already, the members have received death threats, chapter leader Omar Martinez said.

But no one has followed through with promises of violence, Martinez said.

"We've noticed that people ... started to take notice and stopped a little bit of the reckless, abandoned attitude they had. They kind of conformed a little bit more," Martinez said.

The group members try to patrol the area as much they can, juggling patrols in other parts of the county as well as time with families and jobs.

Pipkin hopes the community will warm up to the Guardian Angels. Martinez stressed that the organization members aren't police officers, but supplement law enforcement by being extra eyes and ears for them.

"I want (Crest residents) to know they're here to be a blessing to the community," said Pipkin, whose son was also a Guardian Angel.

Pipkin bought the property 11 years ago and said he hopes to create jobs in the area.

Crime in the area has worsened in recent years, though only Chavez's store seems to have problems with robberies, Pipkin said.

"I'm pretty upset that it would come to something like this. What can we do to stop the crime?" Pipkin said Wednesday during a meeting with Vallejo Councilman Hermie Sunga at the shopping center.

The Solano County Guardian Angels, formerly the Vallejo Guardian Angels, is nearing its first-year anniversary in Solano County. The volunteer organization works primarily to discourage crime elements by being a visual deterrent, though members are trained in verbal conflict resolution.

"The presence of the Guardian Angels will mean a lot here," Sunga said.

Among Pipkin's plans for the area are to start a youth academy or a culinary school -- his background is in hotel management -- to provide skills to wayward children he sees hanging around the strip mall.

"Some of the youth are in need of guidance," he said.

Both Pipkin and Martinez hope more residents of the Crest will report crime and end the "no snitch" culture. Martinez also hopes the group's presence will encourage more volunteers to join the Angels, which has about a dozen members.

"We hope that people will come out and help us and join us, and help us clean up their own community," he said.

For more information, visit <http://scguardianangels.tripod.com>. Contact staff writer Lanz Christian Bañes at (707) 553-6833 or lbanes@thnewsnet.com.