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Urban Angels descend on field for cleanup

■ The weed- and litter-filled land behind the Park Hill Apartments is the target of 40 youngsters

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A group of about 40 children gathered in front of a weed-strewn field behind the Park Hill Apartments in Clifton yesterday afternoon, facing a daunting task. Their mission was to clear the field of garbage and litter piled up among the overgrown weeds. There were discarded egg cartons, soda bottles with faded labels, cigarette boxes, plastic wrappers, rotting clothes and empty beer bottles. "This is disgusting," a young girl

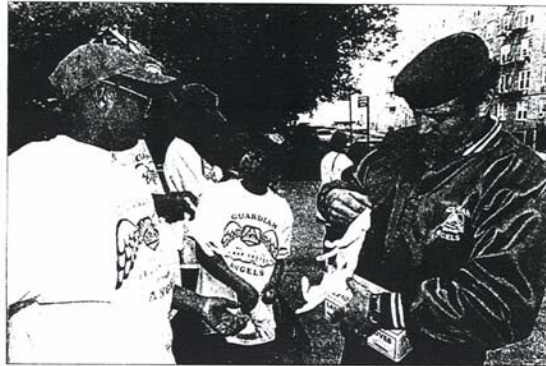
But no one backed down — in fact, they were eager to get the job done.

The children were equipped with rubber gloves, and each wore a white T-shirt and red cap, identifying them as members of the Urban Angels, an organization for youths 8 to 18, founded by the Guardian Angels in the Stapleton Houses last year and brought to the Park Hill Apartments several months ago.

The youngsters were organized into small groups, each led by a member of the Guardian Angels wearing a red beret.

Curtis Sliwa, president and founder of the Guardian Angels — and WABC radio talk show host — realized it would take a lot of hands to clean the field and called for reinforcements.

"Let's get a unit in here," he said, as he scooped up rotting garbage and dead weeds.



ADVANCE PHOTO ■ JIN LEE

Urban and Guardian Angels founder Curtis Sliwa hands out gloves for the project.

to counter gangs that were recruiting children as young as 8 to 10 years old, Sliwa said. The Urban Angels meet twice a week after school and all day Saturday to learn character education such as building self-respect, avoiding violence and drugs, taking small in-

zens.

At least once a month they conduct a community event, such as yesterday's cleanup, to put into practice what they learn, Sliwa said. Other activities include removing graffiti, visiting senior cit-

Sliwa estimated about 150 children from the two apartment complexes participate in the program.

"How did garbage get here in the first place?" Sliwa said. "You clean up when somebody messes up and not a second afterwards, but not

Their task began in front of the Park Hill Apartments, with a visit from Deputy Borough President Daniel Donovan. Borough Hall funds the program.

"You're helping somebody's mom, dad, grandparents," he told the children. "Thank you. You already made us proud. Do a good job today."

The children cleared the litter from sidewalks and curbs as they made their way to the field. Some of the garbage was caked into mounds of dirt.

Trevon Randle, 11, of Clifton, found a stick and used it to loosen the dirt.

"All right. I'm softening up the dirt so you can pick it up," he told a member of his unit, led by Guardian Angel Momo Young, 24.

Randle admitted he was a litterbug prior to becoming an Urban Angel.

"To tell you the truth, I used to," he said. "I don't do it right now. I put it in my bag or in my pocket."

Krystal Gordon, 12, of Clifton, said she also stopped littering.

"If I don't see a garbage can, I put it in my pocket," she said.

It took a long time for Ms. Young's unit to clean some of the curbs, and several other units had gone ahead to the field. So Ms. Young was alone when she led her children past a group of teen-age boys hanging out on Park Hill Avenue.

"What are you, a sergeant?" one of them called out.

"You gonna clean up for me?" a second youth said.

The activity drew some positive responses, as well.

Regina Black, 11, who was on her way home from Dreyfus Intermediate, Stapleton, signed up for the program.

"I just want to help clean up and help where people live," she said.

La'Shira Kiadi, 12, of Clifton, said everyone should take part.

"You should always clean up your community before it turns out like this," she said.

Their work finished, the young Urban Angels headed back to a celebration pizza party in the community room of the Park Hill Apartments. But on the way, they were confronted by an unpleasant reminder that it will take some time to change habits and keep their community clean: they had to cross a puddle of juice pouring from a nearby discarded water