

Burglary suspects nabbed by police as Angels patrol neighborhood

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NEW BEDFORD — Four unarmed men wearing red berets spent Wednesday morning walking along Briarwood Drive, a quiet Far North End neighborhood victimized by numerous house breaks in the last two months.

A police cruiser drove by as several neighbors, frustrated by the burglaries, approached the Guardian Angels and thanked them for patrolling their neighborhood. Several said they welcomed any additional security presence.

"We're here to help," said Jerry Pinto, commander of the fledgling New Bedford Guardian Angels chapter. "That's our sole purpose. We want to work with the neighborhoods."

The neighbors' concerns were validated as two people were arrested Wednesday for allegedly trying to break into a house on Briarwood Drive while the Angels were circling the neighborhood.

Police Officers Michael Boswell and Timothy Gibney responded to a neighbor's 911 call and arrested Christopher Baptista, 31, and Sonia Cote, 30, both of 74 Locust St., New Bedford.

Baptista and Cote allegedly dressed as cable contractors and rang doorbells to see which houses were unoccupied. Police said they pretended to be conducting a survey if someone answered the door.

New Bedford police spokesman Lt. Jeffrey P. Silva said the suspects possessed a bag containing burglary tools. It did not appear they had stolen anything.

Baptista and Cote are being charged with attempted breaking and entering and possession of burglary tools, Silva said.

The Far North End has been hit hard by break-ins, particularly in the last two months, when police reported at least 200 burglaries across the city. There have been more than 820 breaks this year in New Bedford, records show.

Silva commended Boswell and Gibney for Wednesday's arrests.

"In the wake of the recent rash of house breaks suffered particularly in the North End of our city, I am proud to answer the often heard rhetorical question, 'Where are the cops when you need them?' with the outstanding work of Officers Michael Boswell and Timothy Gibney," Silva said.

"While the exact number of house breaks these suspects may be responsible for is now the focus of our investigation, suffice it to say their criminal efforts today, while ingenious, were no match for the combined efforts of an alert neighbor and two very dedicated and determined police officers."

A Briarwood Drive resident also told the Angels' Pinto that the suspects had knocked on his door minutes before they were arrested. Pinto said he relayed that information to police.

"We were able to show how we could serve as the middle man between the community and the

police," Pinto said. "We're not trying to work against the Police Department. I don't want bad blood.

"The police have their job. We are just here to help. We're not here to cause problems for the police."

Pinto said the Guardian Angels, an anti-crime, paramilitary-style citizens group, will return to the Far North End for another patrol tonight. Residents will be invited to accompany the Angels.

The Guardian Angels — an international organization with 140 chapters in 14 countries — have conducted six training patrols in New Bedford since the local chapter began organizing in July.

"It's been difficult coordinating everybody's schedules, but we certainly have had plenty of interest and we've been working five or six hours a week just on our recruiting efforts," said Henry Bousquet, a volunteer with the New Bedford Guardian Angels chapter.

Among their local patrols, the Angels have walked down Ruth Street and the Hicks-Logan neighborhood at night.

The group also has patrolled North Front Street in the early-morning hours. It has met with leaders from the local Guatemalan community to discuss the immigrants' safety concerns about being targeted while walking the city streets.

Pinto said nine volunteers are currently undergoing self-defense training for the street patrols. Another seven people have signed on to do fundraising, public relations and other administrative tasks.

Pinto said the chapter is looking for a facility to hold weekly meetings and is in discussions with using a local karate dojo for the group's self defense training.

Pinto said he spoke Wednesday with Curtis Sliwa, the founder and CEO of the Guardian Angels, and Mike Weydt, the Brockton chapter commander, about the New Bedford chapter's progress.

"We're still getting about three or four phone calls a month from people interested in joining," said Pinto, adding that he expects to schedule a graduation ceremony sometime in the next six months after all the volunteers finish their self-defense training.

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