

Still Standing

February 19, 2010

By Andrea Doyle

Beat him, stab him, even shoot him—nothing can stop Curtis Sliwa, radio talk show host and Guardian Angels founder.

Strolling the streets of the Bronx with 55-year-old Curtis Sliwa, founder of the Guardian Angels, who is dressed in his iconic red beret and satin jacket, men and women, all ages and races, stop and thank him for keeping their streets safe. He is a revered figure in these parts and the passion he exudes is intoxicating.

A little more than 30 years ago, Sliwa was managing a McDonald's on Fordham Road in the Bronx.

"I decided to take the neighborhood back from the Uzi-toting, narcotic-sucking, psychopathic, homicidal killing machines," Sliwa fervently explains. He founded the Guardian Angels in 1979 as a group of unarmed citizen crime patrollers. Today, this non-profit, international volunteer organization has chapters in 140 cities in 13 countries.

His battle against crime has been tumultuous, and he shares his triumphs and tribulations with audiences across the country as a corporate speaker. Customized based on the needs of the group, Sliwa's specialties include empowerment, leadership, and how to make a difference.

Sliwa also takes groups to where he started, the South Bronx, on his "Underbelly of New York" tours. Combine Sliwa's colorful personality with a walking tour of a part of New York many out-of-towners don't consider a must-see and you have the makings of an unforgettable afternoon.

The tour was born when Sliwa was asked by the Young President's Organization to take a group that was meeting in New York to the South Bronx. The tour price is negotiable, says Sliwa, though one group paid \$5,000 for an outing, which can be booked through the Underbelly website, www.nycunderbelly.com. The proceeds are used to support the Guardian Angels network.

He divides his time between the Guardian Angels and hosting a popular morning radio show on AM 970 The Apple. His radio career began in the early '90s with a show that featured him and his former wife, Lisa.

"I made my enemies early. Here I was on the radio every morning criticizing John Gotti (the former mafia boss was then on trial for racketeering). Little did I realize that he was in his jail cell listening and flipping out," recalls Sliwa. He believes the elder Gotti summoned his son, John Gotti Jr., the underboss at that time, and told him to "do whatever you have to do to shut him up," according to Sliwa.

Although Gotti Jr. was never convicted of any involvement in what occurred next, Sliwa is sure that the underboss got a stolen yellow cab and took it to a mob-owned chop shop to have it customized for a hit. The handles in the back were removed and a compartment was created under the dashboard for the shooter to lay in wait, Sliwa says.

"They figured, 'We'll fix him. He gets in here, he ain't getting out. This will be his rolling coffin,' " Sliwa bellows. "They rode around my block waiting for me to hail that cab. One morning, two mornings, three mornings. They got me on the fifth day."

In the predawn hours of June 19, 1992, Sliwa got into the back of that cab near his East Village apartment. "I got in and said, 'Madison Square Garden. Hit it. I'm running late.' A bunch of blocks north instead of going toward Madison Square Garden he goes right toward the East River. I'm like, 'Hey! I thought you knew where you were going. Turn this hack around.'"

Sliwa relives that morning: "All of a sudden, the driver puts the pedal to the metal. I hear rustling up front under the dashboard. Unbeknownst to me it's the gunman. He pops up. His butt is on the dashboard and

he is aiming a .38 at my lower extremities. He says, 'Take this, you son of a bitch.' I see the sparks come out of the barrel of the gun and, bam, where it goes, I don't know. I don't feel anything. Boom! He fires again. This time I feel it. Cramping. Bleeding. I can't even breathe. My whole system is geared up. I have to get out of this cab. I go for the handle but it comes off in my hand. Pow! He shoots a third time. It goes right through both legs like a hot knife through butter. I've been shot either twice or three times and I'm bleeding like a sieve."

He continues, "I'm in the corner behind the driver, no partition. He's trying to shoot me in my head. I'm fighting him with what little strength I have. I have the Guardian Angels radio, which I always have; it's on the seat, and it's on. I say, 'Angel One, Code Red,' which means, 'Angel down.' Lisa hears this and starts screaming in her radio, which throws the driver off. He makes a violent turn and I feel a gust of wind come in. I take a risk and jump off the seat and dive into the direction of what I think is an open window. I go right past the gunman except I only make it halfway out. He catches me by my belt. I'm trying to hit the asphalt but he's pulling me up. It's like a seesaw. The driver sees this and smashes me into some parked cars. The shooter puts the gun in my back, pop, and pushes me out. They assume I'm dead."

They Assumed Wrong

Miraculously, Sliwa survived.

"I'm in intensive care. A day-and-a-half later I wake up. The first person I see is Ed Koch, [former New York City mayor], who had been my adversary. I thought I had died and gone straight to Hell. When I saw Lisa, I knew I had made it. The recovery was brutal. Colostomy bag. Reverse surgeries."

Following the shooting, Sliwa summoned his strength to retaliate in the way he knew best: his radio show. Right from his hospital bed. He even started a daily "Mob Talk" segment slamming the Gotti family.

There was no question in Sliwa's mind about who did this to him, but he had a hard time convincing others. It took 12 years to have his suspicions confirmed. One of the attackers, Michael Yannotti, was arrested on other charges and, as part of a plea bargain, shared details about the plot to kidnap, assault, and kill Sliwa that was masterminded by Gotti Jr.

Gotti Jr. was never convicted in the shooting; after four trials against him ended in hung juries, the federal government recently announced that it will not seek a fifth.

When Sliwa was released from the hospital, a slew of strange women began calling his apartment, which he says was another plot masterminded by the Gottis, this time, to undermine his marriage to Lisa. It worked and the two divorced.

Today, Sliwa is married to Mary, COO and executive director of the Guardian Angels, and they have a son, Anthony. A vocal advocate and passionate supporter of Republican and Conservative principles, Sliwa would like to one day hold a political office. His chances are good, as he does have a Guardian Angel on his shoulder.