

## Guardian Angels founder defends Q-C leader

Brian Wellner | Posted: Thursday, May 20, 2010 2:00 am | [\(42\) Comments](#)



Guardian Angels founder Curtis Sliwa defended the actions of a chapter leader charged with assaulting a man in Davenport, saying it takes “street smarts” to chase crack dealers, prostitutes and thugs out of neighborhoods.

He also said James Steel, who has a criminal record, has been a good leader of the Davenport chapter of the Guardian Angels.

“He’s led many patrols in extraordinarily dangerous situations,” Sliwa said Wednesday of the 30-year-old Davenport man charged in Scott County with assault causing serious injury, a felony, in connection with an April 25 incident.

Two other Guardian Angels, Thomas Buechel, 51, and Stephen Cypret, 30, both of Davenport, also are charged with assault causing serious injury in the incident.

Steel and a fourth Guardian Angel, Thomas J. Cress, 28, are charged with making false reports and false imprisonment. Buechel and Cypret also are charged with false

imprisonment.

Steel’s record, including several theft convictions in Scott County, would disqualify him as a police officer, but not as a Guardian Angel, Sliwa said in a telephone interview.

“We attract a very wide mix,” he said.

Criminal background checks are done on all members, Sliwa said.

But the Scott County Sheriff’s Department, which does the background checks for the local chapter, did not have an application on file for Steel, Lt. Bryce Schmidt said Wednesday.

Some coming from a life of crime have credited the Guardian Angels with turning their lives around, Sliwa said.

“It’s a vehicle for them to be involved,” he said. “A lot of times, if you’re not involved, you’re apathetic or become part of the problem.”

Steel’s brushes with the law, according to court records, include:

He stole a BMX bicycle in 1999. He pleaded guilty to the fourth-degree theft charge, a serious misdemeanor, and was sentenced to 30 days in jail.

He threatened a juvenile in order to steal a pack of beer from a store in 1998. He pleaded guilty to fifth-degree theft and contributing to the delinquency of a minor, both simple misdemeanors.

He also pleaded guilty to possession of drug paraphernalia in 1998, fifth-degree criminal mischief in 1999, and fifth-degree theft in 2005.

More recently, Steel was charged with fifth-degree criminal mischief in an April 8 incident on the Davenport skybridge.

According to police reports, Steel, while on duty as a Guardian Angel, accused two people of stealing a Hoveround motorized scooter, then damaged the scooter in a confrontation on the skybridge.

Steel grabbed the scooter and jerked it twice, the second time knocking a person out of the chair, reports state.

Sliwa said prior to the April 25 assault he had heard nothing but accolades for Steel’s work as a Guardian Angel.

“Only good stuff,” he said.

Sliwa called the Davenport police investigation around the April 25 incident “very strange” and wondered why it took three weeks before charges were filed on Monday.

“The Angels called the police to the scene,” Sliwa said Wednesday. “No one arrested them at the scene. I find it extraordinarily odd (charges came) three weeks later. I never heard of anything like that. What changed from that night?”

The four men were “on duty” and were wearing their signature uniforms when the assault occurred at 12:48 a.m. April 25 in the 600 block of West 3rd Street, police said.

Steel said Tuesday that he and the other Angels were escorting a woman with whom he had had a relationship and who was being stalked by the victim. He said the victim took a swing at him twice and he held the victim’s arms in self defense.

The Angels put handcuffs on the victim and called police, Steel said.

The victim suffered a broken arm in the incident and was treated at University Hospitals, Iowa City, police said.

Sliwa was informed of the incident the day after it happened. He didn’t know of any charges against the Angels until they were filed.

The name of the victim has not been released. He has not been charged with any crime.

The investigation didn’t begin until last week, Davenport police Detective Bill Thomas said Wednesday.

“We are overloaded right now,” Thomas said of the time lag. “I got to it as soon as I could.”

Steel, Buechel and Cypret are the first Guardian Angels to face assault charges outside of New York City, Sliwa said. The volunteer organization of unarmed citizens, which started in New York in 1979, reports on crime and makes citizens arrests in 140 cities in 14 countries.

While he was a night manager at a McDonald’s in the Bronx, Sliwa wanted to start a “pro-active” citizens watch in a part of the city where, he said, “criminals ran amok.” He recruited his restaurant closing crew, trained them over seven months and launched the Guardian Angels.

Early on, he said, Angels were harassed by police in New York who called them vigilantes.

Sliwa was arrested 76 times, he said.

Over a two-month period in 1988, a total of 22 Angels were arrested on Manhattan’s West Side, a New York Times news story reported.

The charges, including disorderly conduct and disturbing the peace, were always dismissed, Sliwa said.

“They thought they were doing good by arresting us and locking us up,” he said.

Sliwa didn’t expect a negative situation to come out of Davenport, where Guardian Angels and police have had a strong working relationship since the inception of the local chapter in 2007, he said.