

Guardian Angels take to Savannah streets in battle against crime

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By Arek Sarkissian II



Within the first few moments of a recent night patrol with the Guardian Angels, their mission appeared clear.

On a virtually pitch-black stretch of 34th Street between Montgomery and Jefferson streets, a large crowd of people lurked on a porch; the smell of marijuana was abundant.

Rather than steer clear of the trouble, two men clad in the group's familiar red jackets and red berets walked toward the home with flashlights.

"We're tired of the bad guys," Shannon Liles, commander of the Guardian Angels Savannah chapter, said as he observed two of his members at work. "We don't get paid for this. We train and come out and we decide that we're going to stand here, and if the bad guys want to do the bad guy stuff while we're here, we'll take care of that, too.

"We confronted them and there was a verbal confrontation, but the smell of marijuana went away."

The Savannah chapter of the organization has been on "safety patrols" since 2003.

Savannah-Chatham police spokeswoman Gena Moore said her department did not wish to comment on the Guardian Angels. But Metropolitan neighborhood residents and business owners welcome their return.

"That is exactly what needs to be done," said Kevin Clark, owner of Under the Rainbow lodging facility near 38th and Whitaker streets. "It's old-fashioned, in your face and just great."

Clark said the Angels were regular visitors to the neighborhood a few years ago, but their presence tapered off. With thoroughfares like Jefferson Street rife with prostitution and vagrants, perhaps the Angels will create another positive impact, Clark said.

"I know things like prostitution is a lesser crime, but they lead to bigger ones," he said. "The more eyes and ears, the better."



As of May 15, metro police has seen a 34 percent reduction in violent crime this year and a 13 percent drop in property crime. Central Precinct, which patrols the Metropolitan neighborhood, has seen a 14 percent reduction in violent crime and a 1 percent reduction in property crime, according to data provided by the department.

Clark added more Metropolitan homes have been picked for renovation, despite a slowdown due to a sluggish economy.

No weapons or drugs

The Guardian Angels began their recent night patrol with a required pat-down in a parking lot directly across from Central Precinct. The ritual is meant to assure police that anything illegal or potentially harmful found during possible scuffles is not theirs, Liles said.

"If we get into an altercation on the street and a knife drops to the floor, we can guarantee it's the perpetrator's knife because we've been searched," he said. "We can take that to court - everyone here has been searched."

Liles said that, for their safety, his members are only referred to by their nicknames. They all have day lives, but when they don the red beret, they're known as names like Halo, Monster and Bulldog.

Liles goes by Cabbie, perhaps because he is a manager with Yellow Cab.

After the round of searches, the crew marched single file on 31st Street toward the night's targeted intersection.

"For the next three hours, no drugs will be sold or smoked in this area," he said.

Crime prevention measures

The Guardian Angels endure three months of training for nine hours a week, but the reward is making a difference in the community, Liles said.

"All we're doing is standing there and preventing drug sales, preventing people from shooting up needles, preventing anybody from smoking pot," he said.

"That's what we're finding in this area - the needles, syringes, half-lit joints - all this in a concentrated area."

The police were alerted of their tour shortly before it began. Liles said in the past, if trouble brewed that was too big for the Angels to handle, officers provided a swift response.

"Sometimes they'll send a unit out just to check on us if they know we're in the area," he said. "They respond to us very well and they even have told us they need us out there."

"We don't want to be police officers - we don't want to do what they do - we just want to help."

Moments after their arrival, a man was seen exchanging a plastic baggie for cash and then scampering across Montgomery Street toward two waiting cars.

An Angel on the street where the vehicles were parked announced his suspicion over the two-way radio and Liles quickly ran toward them.

After exchanging a few words, the vehicle tore off.

"Did you see that?" he said, staring back at their distant taillights. "That's exactly how it should have happened - there's no greater feeling than that."