

Martial arts instructor looks to start Guardian Angels chapter in Binghamton

By Steve Reilly • sreilly@gannett.com • June 6, 2010, 8:05 pm

BINGHAMTON -- Fed up with a perceived escalation of crime in the city, one local martial arts instructor has been spurred to take action of his own in an effort to clean up the streets.

Bill Doheny, 51, is currently working to form a Binghamton chapter of Guardian Angels, an unarmed civilian defense group with chapters that patrol the street of cities in 14 countries worldwide.

"I'm doing this because I have a family and I know what it's like to live in a neighborhood where all you can afford is to pay \$275 a month for rent, and your neighborhood is now drug infested, and your kids can't even go outside," Doheny said.

There are currently seven chapters in the state, including the original group formed in New York City in 1979 by leader Curtis Silwa.

Guardian Angels chapters carry out the dual role of keeping watch for crime with foot patrols, and physically protecting civilians from thugs and criminals either verbally or through unarmed combat.

Plans are still in their preliminary stages, and Doheny said is currently working with the regional Guardian Angels coordinator to formulate a proposal to submit to city officials.

Doheny claims there is an obvious gang problem in the city, and citizen action is needed to take back the neighborhoods he is seeing deteriorate under the scourge of drugs and violence.

"I can even name the streets," he said. "We're going to videotape the areas."

In other cities, Guardian Angels chapters have been alternately embraced by law enforcement agencies as a welcome companion and brushed aside for fear they will interfere with professional police work.

Binghamton Police Chief Joe Zikuski said he would remain open to Doheny's plans, and might consider giving a local Guardian Angels chapter his approval if a realistic proposal is put forward.

"We don't want vigilantes out there, but obviously the more eyes and ears the police have, the better," Zikuski said. "It depends on what they have planned before I decide whether I support it or not, but if it's done in the appropriate manner, it could be useful to us."

Statistics from the state Division of Criminal Justice Services show a steadily increasing crime rate in Binghamton from 177 violent crimes recorded in 2005 to 276 in 2008, before a slight decline to 215 in 2009.

Those who are interested in helping Doheny form a local chapter of the group can contact him at (607) 771-6202.

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Bill Doheny is a martial arts instructor at Shamrock Athletic Center in Johnson City who plans to start a local chapter of Guardian Angels, an unarmed citizens patrol. (REBECCA CATLETT / Staff Photo)

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