

Questions and Answers With . . .

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The D.C. chapter of the Guardian Angels has announced that it will be making new patrols in the Columbia Heights and Mount Pleasant areas, where residents have complained about drug dealing and violence between predominantly Latino street gangs. This violence included a spate of shootings and retaliations, including a running gun battle across busy 16th Street NW in October.



The new Guardian Angels patrols mark a major expansion of responsibilities for the D.C. chapter, which has 12 to 15 members and has done few patrols in Northwest in recent years. In Columbia Heights, the Angels will have an office on Irving Street NW and will provide 24-hour security for a homeless shelter on nearby Park Road.

John "Unique" Ayala, a native New Yorker who is the head of the D.C. chapter, spoke to staff writer David A. Fahrenthold about the Guardian Angels' goals. Here are excerpts from that interview.

Q What sort of work will you be doing in the Columbia Heights area?

A In Columbia Heights, Mount Pleasant, basically we're doing crime-prevention patrols. We'll be patrolling the area, [the] eyes and ears for police. . . .

It's not just about Guardian Angels being involved; it's about getting the whole community involved, from the adult to the teenager to the kids. . . . Because of our reputation, it makes it a lot easier. . . . It's not the fact that the police can't do it, or the Orange Hats. It's just that we have a reputation when we're here [on] 24-hour patrols.

How will you handle the situation if a Guardian Angel stumbles across a crime in progress?

Let's say we're walking down the street, we're on an average patrol, [and] all of a sudden somebody across the street snatches a purse. We're going to immediately chase him. One angel will stay with the person. . . . The police take [the suspect], and if we have to testify in court, we're going to do that.

[If Angels find someone smoking crack] we make them actually destroy [the drugs], we make them step on it, because that sends a signal . . . 'We can't smoke our crack here, because if the Guardian Angels come up on us, we're going to have to stop.'

We're not vigilantes. Vigilantes are judge, jury and prosecution. We've got to work by the law.

Are you worried about Guardian Angels being injured on the street?

We always worry about that every day, because it can happen. . . . When I came in, it was explained to me: If you decided to do this, it can happen. It's a choice that you take.

It can happen, but we hope and pray that it doesn't happen. If we feel a situation is too dangerous, that we can't handle it, we're going to call the police and have them come do their job.

What do you want people to think when they see a Guardian Angel's red beret on the street?

They [should] think of safety, a deterrent. Here in this neighborhood already, we walk down the street [and] we see guys standing on the corner that we know are dealing drugs. . . . [The] guys see us and they'll disperse, which is a good thing for us.

What's the biggest obstacle to your success?

Automatically a lot of the youth look at us as police, and our goal is to get a lot of the youth involved with the Guardian Angels so they can do positive stuff, before the gang members get to them. . . . We have to get their trust, get the youths' trust, and tell them, 'You're not a snitch [if you talk to the Guardian Angels].'

In a year, what kind of impact do you think the Guardian Angels will have had in this area?

I hope it will be positive. . . . Hopefully, a year from now, they'll say, 'There were so many gang shootings . . . in the community, and we look now and all the youth are involved with the Guardian Angels.'