

Crime-stopping angels descend on Stroudsburg

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Stroudsburg is about to be covered in red.

The first six members of a newly formed Guardian Angels chapter graduate from training today and will begin conducting safety patrols in the borough.

"Our main focus is to be a visual deterrent. We're also the eyes and ears of the police," chapter leader David Piccioni said.

The Alliance of Guardian Angels Inc. is a nonprofit community outreach and service organization focused on public safety and education. With chapters in 85 cities and nine countries, they are best known as a worldwide organization of local crime watch street patrols. The group originated in New York City in 1979 as a grass-roots response to rising crime. The group's founder, Curtis Sliwa, continues to be an active member and vigorous promoter of the organization. The Stroudsburg chapter is led by Piccioni and his fiancée, Lisa Morrell. A former broadcaster, Morrell's own brush with crime planted the seeds for the local group.

"I myself was a victim of a crime back in February. About a week after it happened, David, my fiancée, read an article about the Guardian Angels and about Curtis. He called Curtis, and we had a meeting and thought, wow, this would be a great idea," she said.

Morrell had other reasons as well. "We are all residents of Stroudsburg and we all care about Stroudsburg and we see problems happening in Stroudsburg," she said.

The six Stroudsburg chapter members have been training for about four months. Once they graduate, each member will be expected to put in eight hours a week of volunteer patrolling. They will begin their patrols in the borough of Stroudsburg, but Morrell said they hope to expand their patrol area once they get a larger contingent trained.

Scott Koppenhofer, a Guardian Angels alumni, serves as the Stroudsburg chapter's trainer and focuses on chapter development and speaking engagements. He's been with the Guardian Angels for 19 years.

The Guardian Angels don't always do background checks, but Koppenhofer said they do screen applicants. "You'd be surprised how many people are honest and fill out their criminal background on an application."

The group may accept an applicant with a criminal history. "Depending on how serious the crime they committed was, how long ago it happened, and what their current lifestyle is, they can still become a member," Koppenhofer said. "We've had ex-gang members join, and they've been some of our best members because they know what's going on in the street."

Trainees are made aware of the rules. "During the training or even after they graduate afterward they all understand if they don't follow the protocols they can be stripped and cut from the organization permanently," he said. And not everybody makes it through training and graduates, according to Koppenhofer. "So there's a lot of respect for anybody that is a safety patrol," he said.

When they go out on street patrol, the Guardian Angels are issued their colors — the red lettered, white T-shirts and red jackets many associate with the group. They're kept locked up and are only distributed for the patrols. "We search our members before we go on patrol. Just in case they have a pocket knife or Kubotan keychain or something they forgot when they came down. It's a precaution. We make sure absolutely no weapons are on patrol with us at any time," Koppenhofer added.

Morrell and Piccioni have been attending crime watch meetings throughout Monroe County over the past few months and are trying to understand the problems they will face. They even have a liaison with the Stroud Area Regional Police. "They are willing to be supportive of us," Morrell said.

Koppenhofer knows the group has some image issues. "We'll get the 'vigilante' term ... we are not about taking the law into our own hands. We stay within the law. All we do is follow the rights every citizen has. We have no special privileges. We work organized and have protocols we follow," Koppenhofer said.

Morrell and Piccioni were on hand for the recent forum on gang awareness in Coolbaugh Township. "A lot of the people in the audience were angry and upset and wanted everything to stop — all the crimes and activities that have been happening," Morrell said. "And a lot of what everyone on the forum was talking about was reactive to what's happening now. And I see what we are doing in Stroudsburg as something a little more proactive instead of reactive."

She cited the group's approach to the problem of unattended "latchkey" children as an example. "The Guardian Angels have a lot of programs that the teens can get involved in, and that's proactive," she said.

All Guardian Angels receive training in self-defense, first aid and CPR, patrol techniques, conflict resolution, public speaking, basic law as it relates to citizen detentions and gang and drug awareness.

"We take them out on patrol and teach them how to recognize situations, and not to jump to a conclusion just because you see something that's a little strange," Piccioni said. He stressed the cautious nature of their work. "If we see something, we call the control center if something looks suspicious. We're not going to rush to jump into something unless absolutely necessary," Piccioni said.

The group's approach to de-escalating hostile situations is to make a friend of the angry person. "We treat people with respect. We don't want to get physical. That's the last thing we want to do," Koppenhofer said.

But those situations are rare. "Ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the time nothing happens but getting a lot of exercise when we go out on patrol, and that's fine by us," Koppenhofer said.

Besides Piccioni and Morrell, the members of the Stroudsburg chapter include David Vazquez of Marshalls Creek, William Zalewski of Mount Bethel and Christopher Sierra of Bushkill.

The graduation ceremony takes place at noon today at the county's control center in Snydersville. It will be attended by Guardian Angels founder Curtis Sliwa, and is open to the public.

Guardian Angels Initiatives

Community Safety Patrols: The heart and soul of the organization, safety patrols cover streets,

subways and community events.

Junior Guardian Angels: Teaches community involvement and decision-making skills to children between 7 and 11.

Urban Angels: For children between 12 and 15 and for those showing signs of involvement with criminal elements.

Cyber Angels: A program to address crime on the Internet. They use partnerships with corporate and government entities to educate and promote online safety.

Anyone interested in joining the Stroudsburg Chapter of the Guardian Angels can call Lisa Morrell at (570) 421-8933.