

News

Guardian Angels organization may be coming to Lorain

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CLEVELAND — When two Cleveland Clinic employees were shot in the head during a February robbery in Ralph Perk Plaza, Luis Gonzalez knew he'd had enough of the violence in his city.

Gonzalez, who had joined the Detroit Guardian Angels in 1994, immediately got to work bringing a chapter of the crime-fighting members to Cleveland. Now, nearly three months later, Gonzalez said his chapter has decreased crime in the city by at least 35 percent.

"We made a commitment to the city, and we're carrying it out," he said. "We're making Cleveland a better place, but you can't work a miracle overnight."

With the recent outbreak of shootings in Central Lorain resulting in two deaths and three injuries in a two-day time period, Gonzalez said he thinks there could never be a better time to bring a Guardian Angels' chapter to Lorain. By recruiting members to engage in safety patrols, educational programs, Internet safety and community service, Gonzalez said he believes violent crimes in the city could drop just as much as Cleveland's has.

"It's going to depend on the citizens," he said. "If the citizens can make it stand, it can and will work."

Nineteen Lorain residents signed up to learn more about the organization at a Thursday night meeting at Fayban's Restaurant designed to introduce people to the Guardian Angels. Aaron Brilbeck, the spokesman for the Toledo chapter of the Guardian Angels, said with the high number of sign-ups, a Lorain chapter of the group is highly likely.

"I'd say it's very likely something starts here given the turnout and the recent rash of violent crime in the city," Brilbeck said. "Seeing so many people there (at the meeting), I can tell they really care about the community."

Being a part of the group consists of more than just patrolling the city streets though, Gonzalez said. While the Guardian Angels do monitor residential neighborhoods, community festivals and celebrations for criminal activity, members also work as role models for children in their communities.

The Guardian Angels have a number of in-school programs, which include lessons on bullying and gang resistance — two topics that could greatly benefit Lorain's children, Brilbeck said. The Urban Angels, a program for 12- to 16-year-olds, works to provide alternate activities to teenagers to keep them out of gang and drug circles.

"We are not just a crime-fighting organization. We help people whenever they need it," Gonzalez said. "This is a collaborative effort though. The police back us up 100 percent."

Lorain police Capt. William Engle said the Lorain Police Department would give its full cooperation to the Guardian Angels if a chapter was started here. The department even tried to get a chapter started about two to three years ago, but it fell through because of communication problems.

"I'm sure they could work here, help us out here," Engle said. "We can't solve any crimes without information, and the Angels could help find the information (residents) give us."

Becoming a member of the Guardian Angels isn't just a matter of volunteering. People who want to join must undergo a police background check and an extensive three-week training process, Brillbeck said.

Brillbeck said a minor criminal record would be overlooked when it comes to joining the Guardian Angels, but anyone with serious convictions, such as murder or child pedophilia, would be turned away. Those hoping to become vigilantes should also think twice about joining the group.

"If you want to go out and crack skulls, you're going to be shown the door," Brillbeck said. "We are here to make a positive change in the community."

After passing the background check and learning the ropes, members patrol the city with trained members of the group. In Lorain's case, members from the Cleveland chapter would help train residents for up to three months before allowing them to patrol on their own.

Although becoming a Guardian Angel is no cakewalk, Gonzalez said he believes Lorain residents are ready for the challenge.

"It's not easy because you're out there everyday," he said. "As long as you are willing to operate and organize with the police in your city, you can make it work."

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