



In the presence of Angels

Guardian Angels to deter crime downtown: founder

By **BROOKES MERRITT**, Sun Media

Curtis Sliwa's solution to the drug, prostitution and gang problems along 118 Avenue doesn't call for more police uniforms, but rather more grown men wearing red berets and red sateen jackets. The mere sight of Guardian Angels, Sliwa says, helps deter crime.

Sliwa - who founded the controversial brotherhood of citizen protectors in the Bronx back in 1979 - toured Edmonton's mean streets Saturday night, and plans to return here in August, when up to 16 local Angel wannabes will graduate from three months of training, and hit the streets.

Sliwa spoke to Sun Media from Calgary Sunday, where he was congratulating the first nine members of Cowtown's new GA chapter.

"On 118th we saw fights, crack deals and prostitution right out in the open," Sliwa said. "I was shocked. But nearly every person who saw us walking around - even the aboriginal gang members - asked when we were going to set up and help out."

Earlier Saturday Sliwa met with Montrose community members who told of the growing criminal trend in their neighbourhood.

"About 40 people showed up, it went extremely well," Sliwa said. "It was great to get a hands-on feel for some of the challenges Edmontonians face fighting crime. People are saying that we're needed here desperately."

It was not known if members of the Edmonton Police Service attended the community meeting.

Mayor Stephen Mandel and Police Chief Mike Boyd gave Sliwa a chilly reception in January 2006 when he announced plans to visit the province in the spring. Since then Mandel has remained mute. Boyd's position has softened somewhat: while Sliwa was visiting Edmonton last May Boyd said he hoped the EPS and the Angels could work together.

Since then Sliwa says Edmonton's response to the red uniforms has also warmed. They've worked hard to dispel impressions they condone vigilante justice, which Sliwa insists they do not. Members are trained in self defense and to perform citizen's arrests.

"Most of our impact is simply from our presence," Sliwa said.

"Young men, who are traditionally the most apathetic and difficult group to speak to - because they view us as adversarial - were even asking us when we're going to get started," he said. "They say it's become so bad on their gang turf that even elderly women and kids can't be going out at night."

Sliwa said Edmonton should have between 14 and 16 Angels on the streets by mid-August, nearly double the nine Calgary has.

"That's because Edmonton has things together before Calgary. The infrastructure has been in place for nearly a year here, and there is a lot of interest."

JoAnn McCartney, a former EPS vice cop who counsels street prostitutes, said she's reserving judgement on the Angels until she learns more about them.

"They are an unknown, I don't know if they will help improve things on the streets of Edmonton," she said.

"All I can say is that I don't support any form of vigilante justice, so I hope that's not what they are about."



Guardian Angels' founder and president Curtis Sliwa addresses approximately two dozen members of the public during a meeting at the Montrose Community League Hall, 5920 - 119 Avenue, Saturday evening. (Edmonton Sun Photo by David Bloom)