

On guard for you Guardian Angels set to take back the streets

By **AJAY BHARDWAJ, SUN MEDIA**

When the Guardian Angels hit city streets, they'll send drug dealers and johns scurrying and make the streets safer for families, promises founder Curtis Sliwa.

The New Yorker blew into Edmonton yesterday to launch the Edmonton chapter of the Angels. At the same time, Sliwa called on residents to band together to take back their streets, starting with 118 Avenue, the city's most notorious prostitution stroll.

"We're just going to make people feel better because when there are fights and altercations and arguments, we're just going to get in between people like peanut butter between two slices of bread," the colourful radio host proclaimed at a free barbecue held by the GA at the Alberta Avenue Community League, 9210 118 Ave.

The street patrol group first hit the streets in 1979 in New York to combat a rising tide of violence. Since then, the group has opened 85 chapters around the world in efforts to make streets safer.

Recently, chapters were set up in Toronto and Calgary.

"If a crime is committed and somebody wants the police, we detain everyone and call the police," Sliwa said. "But for the most part, it's going to be a positive influence that walks the streets and shows people you can co-operate and give us information and we'll pass it on to the police."

By their very presence and visibility, the Guardian Angels will deter drug dealers and johns, he said.

"Your customers won't come to you," he warned any dealers within earshot. "They're the ones who'll be intimidated by our presence.

"If you're a girl walking up and down, selling your body as a prostitute, we're not going to physically bother you or harass you. But your johns, they're not going to stop. They're the ones that are going to have an Ex-Lax attack, thinking, 'If I'm going to stop here, are the Guardian Angels going to harass me? Are they going to take a photo of me?'"

Today, Sliwa will accompany a group of Guardian Angels from Calgary along 118 Avenue, said Edmonton chapter member Dave Schroder said.

Critics have called them vigilantes, thugs who just want to bust heads.

"They're not vigilantes. There's no criminal intent," said Merv Swityk, a past president of Neighbourhood Watch, who attended as an individual and not as a representative of the group. "I think their presence in the community and especially around here might be an asset."

The barbecue attracted about 100 people, who gobbled up free burgers and hot-dogs. Some people were eager to join, while others wanted to show support for the newly minted non-profit organization.

"I want to make the streets safer so my wife can walk around safely," said Dan Marsh, who submitted an application to join.

Others patted Sliwa on the back.

"Thank you," said one woman after Sliwa delivered his fire and brimstone speech.

Schroder said he wants people to feel safe if they otherwise didn't.

And from the GA's initial patrols, Schroder said he hoped there would be a ripple effect, sending other people to join other groups like Neighbourhood Watch and the like.



Guardian Angels founder Curtis Sliwa talks with three-year-old Lily Lamb during a free barbecue hosted by the Guardian Angels at the Alberta Avenue Community League yesterday. (Jason Franson, Sun)