

In the Hands Of the Angels

The public safety lessons
of the Restaurant Row flap



Photo: Brian Bauer

Guardian Angels patrol West 46th Street.

The Guardian Angel patrol on W. 46th Street is getting more attention right now than some nearby Broadway shows. And like those attractions, the reviews that have greeted the Angels' campaign are mixed.

To the business owners along Restaurant Row, who claim that the growing number of drug dealers and prostitutes were scaring off business, the Angels' red berets and army camouflage pants are a comforting sight. Many strolling tourists and hungry natives agree. But to others, this young and inexperienced paramilitary-like group conjures up the image of a gang of vigilantes roving the streets, just waiting for a chance to get even.

What's clear is that the patrol represents a growing disillusionment with police efforts to clean up our neighborhoods. That's not exactly surprising. Crack, like an urban plague of locusts, is ravaging the streets. Police are crucial to damage control, but of course it's impossible to station a cop on every corner.

So the W. 46th Street restaurateurs, like some other communities, enlisted the Guardian Angels to watch over their block and businesses. In return, the Angels were given a place to crash and a chance to eat gourmet-type meals, some with names that they were the first to admit they couldn't pronounce. Good enough. Yet does this well-intentioned group sometimes go too far?

Few will challenge the motivation of citizens who act to take back their streets from the gangs and thugs that overrun them nightly. Fearful apathy of the type that let Queens residents ignore the cries for help from murder victim Kitty Genovese 24 years

ago is as frightening a specter as that of Harlem vigilantes bashing a man to death earlier this year for stealing \$20.

Nonetheless, reports of Angels razzing, roughing and searching homosexuals and residents as well as the critical stabbing last week of a 16-year-old Angel are troubling. Neighborhood patrols are there to supplement police, not replace them. The volunteers can deter crime by their very presence but they should call cops when they spot trouble.

That's what thousands of New Yorkers who participate in block association patrols have done this past year. The Bay Crest Block Association patrol in Brooklyn, for instance, scared off gunmen who were holding up a cab driver. The patrol, which is to receive a citation, quickly radioed police who caught the muggers, while the cabbie (an off-duty cop) thanked the patrol for saving his life.

This block patrol, like others in the city, completed a police-supervised training program — something the Guardian Angels have refused to do. Meanwhile, Mayor Edward Koch and Police Commissioner Benjamin Ward met with restaurateurs yesterday in an attempt to smooth over differences. Police should do more to help ease tense relations with the Angels by welcoming the help of the well-meaning volunteers instead of acting as if some precious piece of police turf were threatened. A special invitation from Ward to work within police guidelines might help smooth relations between the cops and volunteers.

The fact is that New York has more than enough crime to go around. The more people who are on watch, the better.