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Citizens on Guard

A closer look at the convoy of Salt Lake's Guardian Angels

BY CHELSEA BUSH

As the Guardian Angels stride onto the Salt Lake scene, people are astir with curiosity and questions. Formed with the foremost aim of patrolling Pioneer Park, the new SLC chapter's slogan is: "Keeping it safe in Salt Lake City." But—really—what can the vigil of unarmed, ordinary citizens do to protect rough neighborhoods and prevent crime? And does vigilant watch mean *vigilante*?

The International Allegiance of Guardian Angels is an established and still somewhat controversial group that claims the altruistic aim of preserving public safe-

ty. In addition to safety patrols in harrowing neighborhoods, the group conducts a number of community activities and youth programs to educate about neighborhood watch. In fact, the Alliance of Guardian Angels is a registered 501(c)3 charity. The organization takes itself and its system of patrolling very seriously. When a new chapter is formed, it is “on probation” and must complete a proposal, introduce itself to the community, conduct recruitment and training, and hold a graduation ceremony authorized by the regional director.

Hardly taking the stage on their own, the Angels appear to be intent on working with the community and law enforcement. A peek inside the *Official Guardian Angels Training Book* reveals that they do not fancy themselves heroes; nor does the group aspire to replace official law enforcement. Rather, they are responding to a strange phenomenon: people tend to shy away from reporting incidents or suspicious activity. The Angels hope what they’re doing will both deter crime and inspire others to be on the lookout.

Before joining a chapter, inductees must sign a Guardian Angels Pledge promising to behave like a Guardian Angel at all times, not just while “on duty.” This means engaging in ethical, tactful and respectful behavior. Angels are prohibited by the organization from wearing the colors (their uniform) while performing any non-Guardian Angel business.

The Guardian Angel really appears to be a model citizen. To be inducted into the group, he or she must adopt the gallant profile delineated in the *Training Book*; it’s one of confidence, sincerity, tact, stable temperament and social aptitude. They are neither passive nor aggressive, but confidently neutral. By exuding an assertive energy, they can ward off criminal activity and earn the trust of the community. The group places profound emphasis on respect and tolerance. While on guard, they are

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instructed on how to use mediation and positive communication instead of violence. Of course it can’t be guaranteed that every Guardian Angel will adhere to these guidelines, but the pacifist purpose is put forth strongly in their code.

Despite their anti-violence motto, many chapters give their Angels martial arts instruction. When I first heard this I was besieged by a mental image of white-teed, red-bereted bodies breaking up a drug deal cluster with a flying side-blade kick. But, given that the Angels are also trained to use verbal communication to deescalate a violent encounter, it seems more likely that any martial arts aptitude is for the sole purpose of defense. To actively attack suspected criminals would probably land them with a lawsuit, if not a lesson in ballistics. So, put yourself in the Angel’s shoes: if you were conducting an unarmed stakeout downtown at night, wouldn’t you want to be plenty trained in self-defense, too?

A typical Guardian Angel patrol is rolled out like this:

Angels assemble and “post up” in a specific problem area, usually after dark, when crime is most frequent. They are partnered while walking the beat, or they’ll form a straight line and march in groups. The patrol leader is in complete charge. The Angels always patrol on foot or bicycle, never in a car. Patrolling on foot, they believe, is the most effective crime deterrent tactic. If they do witness a crime, they call the police, provide reports and descriptions, and sometimes help to detain the criminal until the police arrive (with the least amount of force possible).

“We used to receive a lot of media attention when we first started because of the controversy and novelty of citizens patrolling the streets. Today, public involvement is not only the norm; it is expected.” So explains the Guardian Angels’ *Training Book*. And while this may be the case, the Guardian Angels are certainly still met with mixed attention. Given their novelty

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in Salt Lake, the troupe has garnered quite an audience since its inception late last year. It's been an ongoing topic in local media sources like *Deseret News* and *The Salt Lake Tribune*, and has even become a popular SLC blog topic.

In response to being at times accused of secretiveness, the faction claims this is false. Insisting that they have no secret symbols, agendas or congregations, the Guardian Angels don't feel they need to hide anything from the public—in fact, their goal would be the opposite if they believe their effectiveness stems from a visible presence. So far this holds true for the Salt Lake chapter: chapter meetings have taken place at local spots like Cup of Joe, open to the public and announced ahead of time. One Guardian Angels meeting was filmed for a news segment by KUTV, which reported that the group had upcoming meetings with local police.

Some local resistance to Salt Lake's Guardian Angels may stem from what we perceive as an implication that we can't trust our law enforcement system to respond to crime. But, as has been said by the Angels, they don't aim to replace police efforts nor climb to the tier of law enforcement officials. At least in theory, they view themselves as ordinary citizens subject to the same laws as everyone else. What they are doing is embracing the same "social responsibility" they feel everyone should. Their demonstration, they hope, will inspire others to offer their eyes to the community.

Another brand of critic is those who are flat-out offended at the suggestion that Salt Lake needs marathon crime patrol. It's hardly Gotham, so why the lineup of vigilante superheroes? Yet it can't be argued that Pioneer Park is a place where families go for a comfortable evening saunter. After being chased away from the park by a nearly-nude cyclist with a mile-wide grin a few weeks ago, I say there is always room for more fortification! Many efforts have been made to revamp Pioneer Park and remedy its crime problem, and while the Salt Lake Police patrol the park,



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Perhaps the most eyebrow-raising aspect of the Guardian Angels is the militant-looking spectacle they present when patrolling. They march single file, use command codes, and their colors are a bit evocative of military uniforms, as well as subsequent neo-Nazi garb. "Our uniform is known and trusted around the world. It is our proud trademark of courage and community service," clarifies the *Guardian Angels Training Book*. Their choice of red beret, they say, is for ease of identification, though this hasn't seemed to alleviate the suspicion that they dress militaristically to intimidate.

they can't remain stationary all the time. So, during those pockets of time when officers are called elsewhere, we should be more grateful for a peaceable presence such as the Guardian Angels. As for their effectiveness, well... if I were a prostitute or dealer, I'd be a little sheepish about peddling my wares in front of a procession of marchers in matching outfits.

A June 8, 2008 editorial in the *Deseret News* challenged Utah's new Angels with the question: "Are they heroes or vigilantes?"

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And, either way, how effective can they really be? The skeptical columnist summed up many residents' questions by asking whether there is a real need for them in Salt Lake, not a city where one expects to find "high crime" and where neighborhood watch programs are already in place.

It might benefit Salt Lake folks to look at it this way: while it's impossible to gauge the Angels' success at crime prevention—at least this early on—they don't seem to pose any threat. They do not carry out vigilante justice but work with law enforcement. If they witness a crime during their surveillance, they take notes and turn criminals over to the police. Are they sanctioned by law enforcement, and welcomed by citizens? It's tough to tell. But the Guardian Angels claim never to enter a community without first being invited there, and they are subject to the veto power of the neighborhoods they patrol.

One would think the situation poses a greater danger to the Angels themselves, both of violence and of possible legal issues. How, during crime intervention, do they detain people? What if the criminals are armed? Why are they risking their lives to patrol dangerous areas at night? These issues seem to remain part of the gray area that will surround the Guardian Angels.

I can't blame those who wonder whether these volunteer Guardians might, even subconsciously, be reaching for the superhero paradigm (especially as the graphic novel and movie craze is taking frenzied flight). In May, *The City Weekly* profiled a group of masked public patrollers called "The Black Monday Society" who appeared to be copying, or parodying, the Guardian Angels. When they

start carrying wooden swords with duct tape hilts, I'll squint a little harder at the Angels, but for now I think Salt Lake should be happy to give them a chance. They are earnest in their mission to enrich our communities and bolster our neighborhood watch programs. If successful, they'll be promoting the welfare of the community at no greater cost to the government, or to us—the taxpaying citizens.

Become better acquainted with the Salt Lake Chapter of the Guardian Angels and their mission by visiting www.saltlakecity.guardianangels.org. ■



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