

Guardian Angels Return to L.A. Streets

By Nikki Usher, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

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They were wearing their trademark red berets, white shirts and combat boots. But on Hollywood Boulevard, amid the throngs of tourists and street performers impersonating Marilyn Monroe, Superman and Batman, they barely stood out.

"I want a picture of you guys!" said Mike Cow, a tourist from San Diego. He turned to a bystander and added: "They're weird. I've never seen them before."

It was perhaps not the most auspicious reintroduction for the Guardian Angels, who this summer returned to the streets of Los Angeles for the first time in a decade.

The volunteer citizens brigade, using martial arts and citizen's arrests, gained national attention in the 1980s by patrolling inner-city neighborhoods that are plagued by crime.

While the Angels made their greatest mark in New York City, the group also had several hundred members in seven branches that patrolled neighborhoods from Venice to the San Gabriel Valley in the 1980s and early '90s. They left amid complaints from police and after several members had been attacked — one fatally.

Back then, the Los Angeles Police Department "would treat us like we were the Bloods or the Crips. And since the police didn't respect us, the gangs didn't," said Curtis Sliwa, the group's founder.

Now they're hoping for a renaissance. The group has come back to a Los Angeles different from the one it left, where community policing has taken root and crime rates are generally lower. Sliwa said the Angels have changed with the times, working more closely with police and conducting more training for volunteers.

Sliwa said the group decided to come back to Southern California because of LAPD Chief William J. Bratton, who worked with the group when he was chief of the New York Police Department in the early '90s.

Bratton, who became L.A.'s chief two years ago, has offered a conditional welcome to the Guardian Angels. He said his experiences with the group in New York were largely positive.

But he's reluctant to see the Angels in some L.A. neighborhoods. He said

patrolling Los Angeles is much more challenging because the city is spread out and there are fewer officers to back up the Angels. Moreover, he said, the group's conspicuous presence and aggressive tactics could backfire in the city's strongest gang enclaves.

"If they wear those red berets in the wrong area, the gangs will shoot them in a second," he said.

So far, about a dozen Guardian Angels have begun regular patrols along Hollywood Boulevard and at MacArthur Park.

Bratton said he's comfortable with the group's presence in Hollywood, a tourist district that already has strong police staffing.

"The visibility and eyes and ears they provide is fine, but just don't do it in areas where they are going to be in great risk and danger," the chief said.

Others aren't so sure.

L.A. City Councilman Bernard C. Parks, the police chief from 1997 to 2002, said that he couldn't support the Angels, and that professional police officers should be the only ones doing law enforcement work.

"It's hard enough to train police and keep them abiding by the law," he said. "These were people we knew nothing about."

Since the Guardian Angels left Los Angeles, the LAPD has tried to work more closely with community leaders to identify and target high-crime areas. Los Angeles also established a network of neighborhood councils that have a voice in law enforcement and other city policies.

But the Angels have yet to establish ties with the councils, according to community leaders in Hollywood and at MacArthur Park, who said they were surprised to hear that the group was back in town.

Sylvia Valle, a MacArthur Park neighborhood activist, said she worries that the patrols might make the situation in her neighborhood west of downtown less stable.

"There are four gangs in the radius of two blocks. This is just going to add fuel to the fire," she said.

Hollywood community activist Ferris Wehbe worked with the Angels when they helped patrol the Yucca Street area in the 1980s. He said that effort was effective because the group worked with neighborhood groups. This time, however, he doesn't see that partnership.

"We don't really need them here," he said. "The reason they worked in Hollywood was that they were connected to what the community was doing and really knew us.... I have had no indication of that happening this time."

In the 1980s, when the group was most active in Los Angeles, it had a decidedly mixed record.

It garnered praise when members patrolled the 1984 Summer Olympics. But a few years later, Sliwa was arrested for allegedly clubbing a man in an area of Hollywood the group had sealed off in an unofficial drug sweep. In 1993, in one of several attacks on group members, Angel Glenn Doser was shot to death when he tried to stop a robbery in Hollywood.

The Guardian Angels of the past, Sliwa and others said, could be aggressive and intimidating. They'd march into high-crime areas and ask tough questions, look for confrontations and try to break up drug deals.

"They were just these young guys and women, many of them ex-gang members, looking to rough someone up, get into a little trouble and feel like they were on the side of the right," said Todd Clear, a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York.

The L.A. group has so far been drawn from veteran Southern California Angels and a few new recruits. There's a mix of young and old, and a few women. Sliwa says they're better trained than the Angels of old.

Under new policies, recruits undergo three months of standardized training, during which they learn martial arts and how to make citizen's arrests. They are also subjected to verbal abuse to see how they respond. Guardian Angels are not armed, though many carry handcuffs and cellphones.

Though they've been absent from Los Angeles, the Guardian Angels have remained a force in other cities, mostly on the East Coast. In Washington, D.C., members are working so closely with police, patrolling gang and drug areas, that the department gave them police radios.

Sliwa said the Angels want to pick "mild" targets in Los Angeles, building a record of success, before going into more hostile gang areas. So far, he said, members have encountered little action.

During a recent evening patrol in Hollywood, members didn't make any arrests or break up any drug deals, but they did help an elderly woman and her caretakers push a wheelchair over the curb at Hollywood Boulevard and Ivar Avenue.

An appreciative Vernadette Rebold smiled from her chair and thanked them. "We

remember you from 20 years ago, in New York," she said.

Patrol leader Dave Eagle shrugs when asked about the lack of public memory about their Los Angeles days.

"Sure, we're remembered for New York, and maybe people don't remember us here, but we were here and we are here," said Eagle, who was with the group during its Los Angeles heyday. "It's hard to compete with where you started."