

Curtis Sliwa of the Guardian Angels Promotes Safety For All

By Adam Phillips
New York
15 August 2007



Curtis Sliwa believes that everyone has the power to make the world a better place

of mission began to emerge when he noticed senior citizens seeking refuge inside the eatery each evening.

"I'd see them nursing a cold cup of coffee and a stale burger," he recalls, "and I'd say 'It's eleven o'clock. Shouldn't you go home?' And they'd say 'I'm afraid to go home. The predators will take advantage of me. I'll stay out until the break of day.' So I'd say to the closing crew of mine 'Hey guys and gals! What do you say we walk them home or take the train with them and make sure they get home safe and secure?' So that's how this all started."

Today, Curtis Sliwa is a popular radio talk show host, whose [weekday program](#) addresses issues of the day, most often crime and justice. But at 53 years old, [Sliwa](#) still proudly wears the signature red beret and windbreaker jacket that instantly identify him to New Yorkers as a Guardian Angel on patrol.

Sliwa founded the [Guardian Angels](#) in 1979. It was a difficult era in the city's history. Violent crime was at an all-time high, and fear of robbery and random murder was a fact of life for citizens throughout the Big Apple.

"It seemed that government and public safety elements were inept," he says, "almost like they were saying 'we give up. We can't handle it. We can't govern this city.'"

Given his upbringing in a working class Brooklyn neighborhood and his boxer's build, Sliwa always had good "street smarts." But Sliwa's parents, second-generation immigrants, also taught him the value of hard work and service to others. So it was natural that, as a young man, he would organize volunteer neighborhood cleanups in the South Bronx ghetto where he managed a McDonald's restaurant. But a deeper sense



At 53, Curtis Sliwa Still Leads the Guardian Angels and Goes Out on Patrols



Courtesy: Guardian Angels

Sliwa organized 13 of those ad hoc subway escorts into regular citizen's patrols, notably on the Number Four subway line, which wary riders called "The Mugger's Express" for its frequent armed robberies. Patrols were also launched in the city's parks, streets, and public housing projects.

The first Guardian Angels faced difficulties as both sides of the law greeted them with hostility. Gang members and drug dealers viewed them as turncoats and traitors, while the everyday citizens they were trying to help were terrified.

"They thought we were the **Hell's Angels**, rather than the *Guardian Angels*, recalls Sliwa with a half-smile, "like we were a group of

marauding gang members ourselves!"

Gradually, the Guardian Angels gained mainstream acceptance. Many critics were assuaged when they learned that no Guardian Angel is allowed to carry a weapon on patrol.

But Sliwa knew another method to help stop or prevent crimes: the **citizen's arrest**. It's a legal procedure that allows ordinary civilians to detain suspects they have witnessed committing a felony or whom they believe are about to do so. But usually that is unnecessary.

"It's all psychological," says Sliwa. "You don't even have to say anything. Body language dictates what you are representing. If you are out there harassing people, violating people's rights, then the Guardian Angels are going to step in and physically intervene if necessary."



Courtesy: Guardian Angels

The Guardian Angels were a welcome presence at Ground Zero in the aftermath of the September 11th 2001 terrorist attacks on New York City

Being a Guardian Angel takes courage. So far, six Guardian Angels have been killed in the line of duty, and three-dozen have been badly wounded. Sliwa was once shot five times.

"So I certainly know what the effects of being a victim are because I was just a few inches away from being 'room temperature' [dead] myself. But it's a risk well worth taking."

It takes more than guts or good intentions to become a Guardian Angel. Prospective members must train for 125 hours to learn first aid, crowd control, simple martial arts techniques and other skills before they can wear a red beret. All trainees are vetted for their ability to work well with others. The Guardian Angels is an all-volunteer operation.

"Dedicating yourself to a mission — that's the paycheck," Sliwa says.



Courtesy: Guardian Angels

Curtis Sliwa and the Guardian Angels Advocate for many causes, including cyber-safety, violence prevention, and disaster relief

Today, there are nearly 5000 Guardian Angels in 86 cities worldwide, and the group has expanded its programs to include [Internet safety](#), [school violence prevention](#), even disaster relief.

Curtis Sliwa says one constant runs through his life, both as a Guardian Angel and as a man. "It's the basic premise of 'you dare to care,' and 'if it's to be, it's up to me.'" He believes that everyone — no matter how poor or uneducated — has the power to make the world a better place.



The Guardian Angels have chapters in Tokyo and 85 other world cities