

etc.

Blue Angels may help rescue Houston

United Press International
HOUSTON — Earnest Smith stands on the doorstep of the vacant building he is using for a command post and sadly surveys the battlefield into which he daily sends his young "Blue Angels."

The battlefield is his neighborhood, the Fifth Ward, one of Houston's predominantly black ghettos. Smith, 44, a former cotton picker from Opelousas, La., is trying to take the neighborhood back from the vandals and the thugs.

Smith's outpost is near the corner of Lyons Avenue and Gregg Street, heart of the Fifth Ward. Buildings are decaying, trash litters the area and around

the liquor store next door sad-looking, poorly dressed old men sit on the sidewalk.

"Like it is, the neighborhood is deteriorating," Smith said. "It's dying fast. What I really want to do is restore life to the Fifth Ward."

Smith, who has spent some time as pastor of a small church, takes his orders from the highest level, and even his wife, Betty, takes a backseat to his "commander."

"The Lord told me I want you to wear a uniform," Smith said. "He said put a badge on and your uniform on. He said, 'I'm going to send you some people. I don't want no guns, no clubs, no nothing. I'm going to use you.'"

"The Lord said, 'I want you to go and rescue the old senior citizens out of the hands of the smalltime gangsters and hoodlums. I want you to rescue children from drugs.'"

Smith has gathered 21 young black men to patrol the area. The Blue Angels are similar to the Guardian Angels founded by Curtis Sliwa in New York — but there are major differences.

"Guardian Angels know karate," Chauncy Diggins, 21, one of Smith's Blue Angels said. "We only know what we know in our heads, what we picked up (on the street). This is the only thing I see that's worthwhile on this avenue."

Guardian Angels wear T-

shirts and dashing red berets. Smith's men wear second-hand security company uniforms if he can find them.

The work is dangerous. The patrols walk on foot and are supposed to carry no weapons. If trouble breaks, they are supposed to call police. Police traditionally do not approve of vigilante groups, but they tolerate Smith.

"It is a legitimate group trying to do some good," police spokeswoman Phymeon Jackson said. "They are trying to improve their neighborhood."

"I think if anything happened they would be calling police to handle what crime they saw. They're a community ser-

vice group and not a law enforcement group."

Another difference between Smith's group and the Guardian Angels is Smith has a broader purpose than the strictly security oriented Guardian Angels.

He wants to lead young people toward wholesome living by offering food and parties on Fridays and Saturdays.

But he has little money. He works (sometimes) as a carpenter, and he said he puts much of what he makes into his program. He takes donations — his headquarters is in donated space — but money has been slow in coming.

"I'm looking for some millionaire somewhere with a yacht

out there in the ocean to come and donate us some money so we can fund these guys," Smith said. "Not paid, just funded. They're working for free right now."

Smith buttonholes passers-by, selling his brand of righteous neighborhood boosterism. One target was Barbara Price.

"I feel like it is a great thing to have someone interested in our young people today," Price said. "Certainly, if they start out with them small, give them the training, this will eliminate the crime rate."

Smith has fans, although some admit a lot of people in the Fifth Ward do not take Smith seriously. Raymond Jackson,

who works in Ralston Drug Liquor Store next door, is one of the fans.

"I see a lot of improvement," Jackson said. "Not too many guys hang around on these streets any more. I think they (loiterers) don't move, call the HPD (police) on them."

Shirley Hatton, clerk at a self-serve gas station down the street, said the Angels have peddled hoodlums from robbing vending machines right out of her eyes.

"Ever since those Blue Angels have been there, we've been able to keep the soda waters in and to keep them from robbing the machines," Hatton said.

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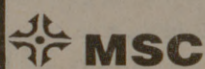
7:00 p.m.

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