

ANGELS

HEAD TO THE STREETS, FESTIVALS AND CLUBS

BY PAUL BLAKEY MBE

Every weekend hundreds of people head into town and city centres. These people are not there to have a drink or spend the night clubbing but rather become Angels to help others have a safe and fun night out.

Street Angels was launched in Halifax, West Yorkshire in 2005. The town had the reputation of being the Wild West of West Yorkshire as between 8 and 12,000 people would visit the town on weekend evenings. Coach trips and visiting football fans, attracted by cheap booze and more pubs and clubs than any other town of in the UK, sadly meant that violence, binge drinking, sexual assaults and under-age drinking were commonplace.

Wandering round the town to see the problems for himself, Paul Blakey remembers, "My wife and I observed many horrendous incidents in the town centre. Police were struggling to control fights; we found trails of blood and vomit; people were passed out in the gutter and there were things happening in alleyways we would rather not have seen. As Christians we thought our town deserved better and we felt called to make a lasting difference. This led to the idea of a café being opened in the town, which was run by the YMCA and Churches Together, as a safe place drop-in."

Meeting the police a few weeks later, Paul shared the idea and the town centre police sergeant, Dave Apsee, became excited. Several agencies had talked about the problems. TV crews and local newspapers had sensationalised the issues. Paul explained, "If we were prepared to do rather than talk, the police were keen to work with us. Dave then asked if we could launch in two weeks' time, Friday 25 November 2005, to tie in with the change in the licensing laws. We said yes – Christmas not being that busy a time for Christians!"

Emails were sent to churches, and a front page headline in the local paper said "Drop by if you are drunk" (not quite the expected tone). Paul commented, "On that first Friday, if we are honest, not having a clue what we were doing or what to expect, we were amazed when 50 people turned up to volunteer. [There were] far too many to sit waiting to help people in our small café, so we took flight to the streets and Street Angels was born; safe people who would patrol the town (on day two onwards in fluorescent yellow jackets) and [we would] offer a safe place drop-in on Friday and Saturdays between 9 p.m. and 3 a.m."

It worked. In the first 12 months violent crime in the town centre reduced by 42%. The Home Office carried out an in-depth study as to why Halifax police had lied about how bad the town was – they worked out they hadn't, and put the amazing change down to the police being willing to work in partnership and people who cared out on the streets of the town centre helping others at a time when it was most needed. →

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STREET ANGELS



Since then the Angels have spread their wings far and wide. The second Street Angels was set up in Watford in July 2006, with other towns and cities quickly getting on board.

Christian Nightlife Initiatives Network was set up in 2008 to support the replication and growth, and since then they have expanded into work at festivals and sporting events, inside club venues and overseas in Magaluf, Tenerife, the Seychelles and soon, America. The Street Angels in Magaluf have received much media coverage, from *Newsnight* to *Songs of Praise*. During the 2017 season the group launched The Gap café to offer a safe place and presence in the daytime.

Club Angels was a response to the needs inside club venues and started in Leeds in 2011. Teams of young Christians put on T-shirts saying “chat, help, listen, care – PS we’re Christians ask us more if you want” and hang out in the queues, the toilets, smoking areas and on the dance floor to see what happens. The Club Angels team are there to offer emotional support, a sick bowl when needed, but also to pray with clubbers and staff and have conversations around life, spirituality and faith.

The work of Festival Angels was set up as a response by local churches to Leeds Festival. With 85,000 festival-goers in and around Bramham Park, a lady from the Methodist church believed that the church needed to be at the festival. Through conversation with organisers Festival Republic, they were offered a marquee to run a café. In the first year a few people from the local church ran a Prayer Café and in the second year extended the opening hours. By year three Festival Republic were so impressed with the Prayer Café that they asked if they could extend the hours so that it was open all the times the festival was running, and also if they could take over the running of the Lost Property tent and have detached teams that patrolled the festival site.

Not ones to turn down a challenge the team said yes, rebranded as Festival Angels and began recruiting volunteers from across the region. Leeds Festival Angels now attracts around 170 volunteers every August Bank Holiday weekend. The team is ready to deal with absolutely anything. Sunny weather means suntan lotion and bottles of water are in high demand, whereas torrential rain means the Prayer Café becomes a safe and welcome refuge from tents that are three-quarters submerged in mud. The Prayer Café sells thousands of





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mugs at £5 each with unlimited free refills of tea and coffee for the duration of the festival. The Lost Property team are on hand to reunite phones, wallets, cash, bank cards, passports, tent poles and car keys with the rightful owners. The most amount of cash in a wallet handed in – £650. The response from the owner when he discovered all the contents in place was something along the lines of “goodness me”. The work of Festival Angels is now expanding to other festivals, with Boardmasters in Cornwall in 2017 and other festivals exploring the idea.

Paul summarised, “The heart of our work is simply to love the person in front of you. Be it offering flip-flops to young ladies whose high heels prove to be too painful, to first aid, bottles of water, offering directions or giving out lollipops (that help to stop fights – yes, seriously). At festivals, including Boardmasters and Leeds, you will find the teams helping put up tents, running prayer cafés, heading up the Lost Property or handing out drinks to the security team. Our banners at the festivals proclaim, with a John Lennon-esque Jesus, that Jesus Loves Festivals – and we believe he does and that he would be there crowd-surfing the main stage and undercutting the cost of food from the burger vans. Inside clubs you will find our Club Angels with T-shirts saying ‘chat, help, listen, care’ and the volunteers are doing just that and creating better nights out for clubbers as a result.” ■

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“Angels now attracts around 170 volunteers every August Bank Holiday weekend.”

The posters contain the following safety messages:

- Ouch:** Ladies - carry a pair of slip-on shoes. In your handbags and briefs when your high-heels are no longer comfortable, the good shoes need to walk.
- Ker Ching:** Please give your money in another part of your hand/bag/wallet. As you aren't going to be back at it all if you're carrying the money, take a photo of your taxi drivers ID and keep it in hand.
- Fill Up:** Always eat before a night out - never drink on an empty stomach. Cook & seasoning before you go home - don't start cooking once you get home responsibly in a chip pan.
- Aarrghh:** Always bring with you hand sanitizer, don't get off alone, take the contact information on you somewhere other than your phone and over a big drink remember to go to the toilet and check for blood.
- Uh-Oh:** Know what you are drinking so you can know how much you have had. This will also help you and your friends know if you have been spiked because you have kept yourself or your alcohol intake. Mix alcohol with soft drinks or water and don't have your drink unattended.
- Ooops:** Pick a venue right for you - if you feel out of place, never drink. Always wear your seat belt. If you are in a car, always wear your seat belt. If you are in a car, always wear your seat belt. If you are in a car, always wear your seat belt.

CNI Network are encouraging people to have a SafeNightOut.party this autumn. These trendy poster designs feature a range of safety messages that our teams have submitted which help ensure people have safe, fun and trouble-free nights out in town and city centres. Ideas such as staying with friends, knowing your limits, eating before a night out, not cooking once you get home – especially not with a chip pan, apologising if someone knocks you or spills your drink, leaving a venue if you don't feel it is right for you, keeping your taxi money in a separate part of your wallet and taking a photo of the taxi drivers ID if travelling alone. You can download the posters, images and messages at safenightout.party