

## Street Angels

Who's there when a good night goes wrong? [Sian Turner](#) investigates an organisation which helps those in difficulty in York's city centre every weekend

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A street angel in action

If you go out in York on a Friday or Saturday night, amongst the many feather-boia clad hen parties and 'lads on tour' stags, you might see some Street Angels.

Clad in fluorescent jackets that bear a striking similarity to those worn by Royal Mail employees, these figures dispense water, flip flops and practical help to the city's needy, and are rarely remembered the next day by those they help.

I first discovered Street Angels through a friend, who, twice a month, dons her oversized reflective jacket and heads out to spend four hours from 10pm to 2am caring for the somewhat worse for wear in York's city centre. Unfortunately for her, it's usually raining too.

Launched in York in October last year, the Street Angels organisation is a faith-based one that brings together volunteers from churches across the city to provide practical help in the small hours to some of the most vulnerable people.

York is now one of many towns and cities throughout the UK the boasts a Street Angels group.

What do they actually do? Well, for those four hours (often longer, depending on how busy the night is), the Street Angels divide the city in half and two teams of three to five volunteers walk the streets, looking out for those in need. Their official mission statement is "to help make York city centre a safer and better place, practically helping, caring and listening to people, especially those in vulnerable or difficult situations." This can take many forms, from giving flip flops to a girl whose heels have broken, finding overnight accommodation for a person sleeping on the street, or staying with someone until they're sober enough to safely get a taxi home.

Although not trained in First Aid, all Street Angels volunteers undergo a rigorous three day training

programme that includes courses on drug awareness, licensing regulations and conflict management. North Yorkshire Police and SIA (the governing body that regulates the training of bouncers) are both involved in the training process.

It was Jennifer Locke, a York resident working for the Christian mission organisation Youth With A Mission (YWAM) who first conceived of the idea of Street Angels for the city. Inspired by the work done in Halifax, where the project first sprung up, she saw Street Angels as a way to expand the work already being done by volunteers in York: "Previously some church and YWAM volunteers had been regularly serving hot drinks on Friday nights on Parliament street," she said, "and I could see that there were a lot of vulnerable people who would benefit from an initiative like Street Angels."

So far, a Christian group wanting to do some good. But who are the people who go out and give up their time for the drunk and the homeless?

Well, anybody. Street Angels York currently has 55 volunteers and is still recruiting. It counts amongst its numbers the retired, those with families, and even some students.

I spoke to Kirsty, a third year English student who has been involved with Street Angels since December 2009.

"A friend of mine helped to get the project up and running," she explains, "and originally I sent off my application form because it sounded like a good project, but mainly because I wanted to support her. The more I've been involved, doing the training weekends and going on nights out, the more I've realised what a great project it is, and how it has a positive impact in York on a night time," she added.

"I'm no perfect angel; I go out on socials, I drink, I love going out," Kirsty explains.

"I have done for the last two and a half years, and I'm very much looking forward to going out more once all my final essays are handed in."

I also spoke to Nick, another third year involved with Street Angels. Both students found it difficult to know how to explain their participation in a project that seems at odds with the stereotypical student lifestyle. They also struggled to explain their actions in relation to their Christian faith, a motivating factor in their lives but one that often carries its own stereotypes.

"People do think it's an unusual thing to chose to do whilst you're at university; surely you'd rather be out drinking than picking up drunk people," comments Kirsty.

"Often you're met with a sort of bemused silence when you tell people about the project, they go 'oh, that's nice,' and then they look away, not really knowing what to say."

The difficulty seems to come with how they are perceived by both the general public, and by their student peers, for whom the Christian stereotype is still strong: "I think the issue is that if you're doing something like Street Angels, people often get a little defensive towards you because it can look a bit like you're positing yourself as morally superior to those who have gone on a night out; that you're better than them and do a civic duty or something," comments Kirsty.

"I think especially because Street Angels is a church-based organisation, people think "oh, Christians, they're judging us for our sins," or something like that, which couldn't be further from the truth."



Nick explained that most of his friends “tend to be quite positive towards Street Angels and think it’s cool,” but lose interest when they find out that it’s a Christian project: “They often want to get involved, and I’ll show them the website and how they can, but as soon as they see that it’s a church organisation, they say no.” Like Kirsty, he admitted that “the main issue is that people think you’re better than everyone else in doing this; that it’s a kind of display of moral superiority.”

Although both students are Christian, both try to explain their involvement as not wholly a faith-based decision, but more one brought out of their experiences of being a student in the night time economy.

“Even though it’s a Christian project, I wouldn’t say that’s my primary reason for doing it,” explains Nick.

“It depends how spiritually you want to look at things – maybe you could say God guided me to it – but to a non-Christian that means nothing. There are many reasons why Street Angels is a great organisation, and it’s not wholly based on faith.”

Although he does not drink himself, Nick has been out on many a night out, and knows the need for practical and emotional support when difficult situations arise. “If I’m just on a night out and I saw a girl crying, I’d go up to her to see if she’s alright,” he says, “but as just a guy on the street there’s limited help I can give. As a Street Angel though, you’re fully equipped to help people and you have an official position – you’re in a uniform – and I think that helps people trust you and they’re more willing for you to help them.”

For Kirsty, her decision to become a Street Angel was very much routed in her own experiences: “I do Street Angels not because I want to judge other people, but because I’ve been the girl walking home on her own with no shoes, and I know that the night can be a scary and lonely place,” she explains.

“Street Angels are great because they’re accessible; they’re not the police, they’re not bouncers, they’re people who are just there to care for you when you need a more personal degree of help and assistance. They do it because they want to help, not because it’s their job, and that I think is a key difference. There’s true heart in what they’re doing; it’s not just them trying to feel superior to others.”

The experience of being vulnerable at night seems to strike a chord with other students. I spoke to Annabelle, Kirsty’s housemate, who knew of her involvement in the project, but was unaware that it was a Christian initiative until our conversation. “Whether you’re religious or not is irrelevant,” she commented. “I’ve been in some very precarious situations before, and I think it’s a great idea to have people there who will help you. I can’t necessarily understand why people do it – I never would – but it’s definitely amazing, not weird.”

The work the Street Angels have been doing over the last five months is beginning to be acknowledged and appreciated by the people of York.

The patrols are often recognised by weekend revellers with greeting of hugs, high fives and the occasional “these guys are legends”. All Street Angels patrols carry a walkie talkie, tuned to the frequency used by the police, York CCTV and many of the bouncers across town.

More and more, bouncers and police are choosing to contact the patrols directly when they find a situation suited to the kind of care Street Angels provide. Jennifer remembers one night when, contacted by the bouncers at one of the riverside bars, they were called to help a woman who had become separated from her husband: "When we arrived we found she had no money, no phone, couldn't remember her husband's number, and that he and their friends had somehow managed to leave without her. We spent over an hour with her visiting the area where she thought they had headed to, and eventually we reconnected her with her husband. She was really thankful that we had been there to help, and that she hadn't had to walk the city alone," she added.

Dealing with situations such as Jennifer's is a regular occurrence on a night out with Street Angels. Much of the patrols' time is given over to relatively minor incidents that, importantly, free up the time of Police and door staff to deal with more serious threats to public safety. The attitude of the Police and bouncers towards the Street Angels - one of friendly co-operation - shows the value they put on the work done by the volunteers.

"One night, at the Punch Bowl just outside of Micklegate, one of the bouncers called us over to deal with a situation of a young girl, only about 15, who had had her wallet stolen but didn't want to report it to the police because her fears of being underage," says Kirsty.

"We were able to take care of the girl and allow the bouncers to get on with their job. They were really grateful, and invited us over to share their supply of sweets when we'd sorted everything out!"

From its conception, Street Angels has always had close links to the North Yorkshire Police force. Mick Henderson, Licensing Office for the City of York, has been involved from the start, helping to secure funding for the project and providing vital training for volunteers.

He is very positive about the work done by Street Angels in working alongside the Police: "We feel that the Street Angels do a great job and actually help free up Police time that would otherwise be spent dealing with the more vulnerable members of society that the Angels have the time and commitment to assist," he commented.

Having worked within the Police and the night time economy for many years, Mick knows all too well the perils of Friday and Saturday nights, and saw the need for Street Angels long before it was actually conceived: "I have always felt that there was a need for such work in the city," he said. "I had seen the scheme being rolled out elsewhere in the country, but didn't know who to approach in York.

"York is a well visited city and the need for Street Angels on the streets when these visitors (and locals) are at their most vulnerable, and in drink, sends out an important message as to how we all work together to make York a safer place to live and visit."

Speaking to Kirsty and Nick, they have endless stories of incidents that they've come across whilst out with Street Angels, some hilarious, some heartbreakingly sad.

What is obvious, however, is the true concern - often brought about by their own experiences - that they have about the night time economy and how very vulnerable and exposed it can leave its revellers.

Kirsty tells one story of girl she found barefoot and distressed early one morning. "I went up and offered her flip flops," she said. "At first she was quite defensive and said she didn't need any help, but as I was about to leave she suddenly called me back and admitted that yes, she did need help. It turned out she was pregnant, on the verge of having an abortion, and she'd come out to try and find the father of her baby.

"Obviously, it's not my job to judge her or give her advice, but I was able to calm her down, reassure her she was safe, and get her a taxi to her mum's house."

Without the practical care given by the Street Angels, one has to wonder how this night, like many others, could have ended up.

Anyone interested in getting involved with the project, or finding out more information about it, should visit [www.ywamyork.com](http://www.ywamyork.com) or [www.streetangelsyork.com](http://www.streetangelsyork.com).

Photo credit: Justyn Hardcastle



## One comment

Phil

5 May '10 at 9:31 am

What many communities may benefit from is a civilian patrol model that is inclusive of all community members and not faith based.

Such a model exists in Street Watch <http://www.street-watch.org.uk>

communities can engage in fully regulated patrols to work in partnership with police in looking after their own communities.

If you would like more information then please contact.

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