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Foot patrols step up security in Frankford

Safety ambassador
 Rahsaan Allen (center) visits shop owner Dominick Paolino, who says the patrols are "tremendously good for the avenue."



ED HILLE / Staff Photographer

By Stacey Burling
 INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

About three years ago, Tim Wisniewski heard that uniformed "safety ambassadors" had once patrolled the Frankford Avenue business district, helping to make the careworn neighborhood seem safer and friendlier.

"I thought, wow, that's exactly what Frankford needs. There's just so many things it could help, from safety to getting rid of graffiti," he said.

Wisniewski, who was working for then-Councilman Daniel Savage, made it his mission to resurrect the program. "I can't tell you how many phone calls I've made trying to find some organization or foundation

that's interested in this," he said.

Wisniewski has finally done it, a testament to persistence and, perhaps, the idealism of youth. Four ambassadors and a supervisor started work last month. There is money to pay them through September and hope for more after that.

It is the kind of small change with bigger ripples — jobs and more jobs — that matters to him. "This is the type of work that I like to do," he said.

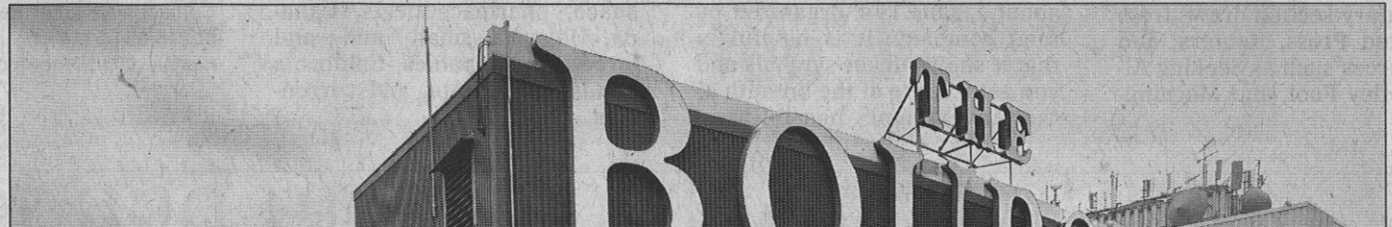
Wisniewski is executive director of the Frankford Special Services District, a municipal authority funded by assessments totaling \$70,000 to \$80,000 on businesses between the 4100 and 5300 blocks of Frankford Avenue. He is 22 —

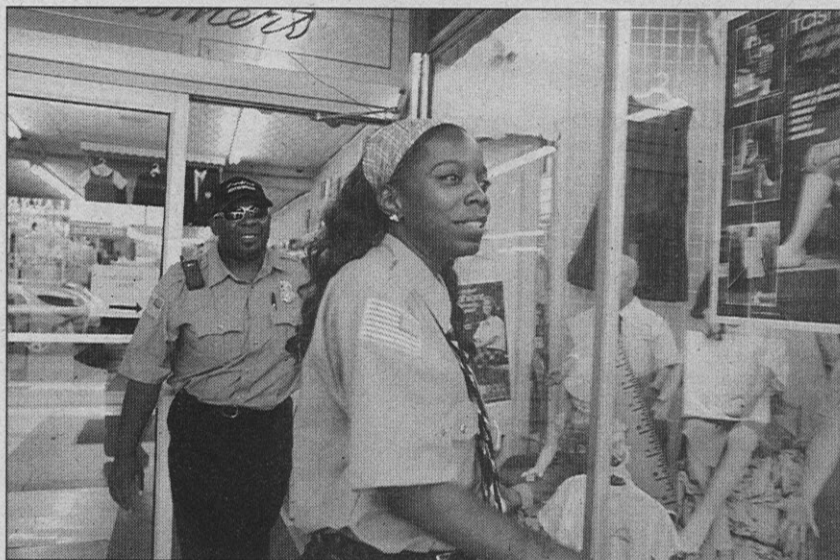
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An effort by the special services district is putting civilian "safety ambassadors" on the street.

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Tim Wisniewski (below) worked to resurrect the foot patrols. At left, Sadequa Armstrong (front) and Rahsaan Allen patrol on Frankford Ave.

Frankford

Continued from D1

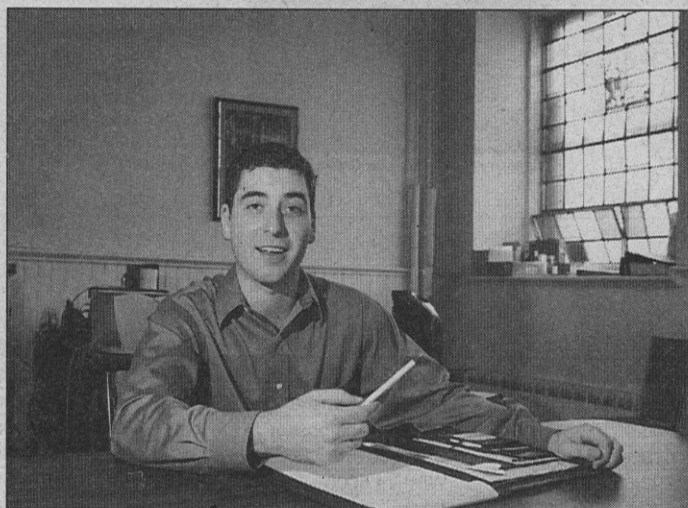
yes, 22 — and graduated in December from Richmond, the American International University in London, with a degree in political science. He got the executive director's job after volunteering to do some of the agency's work from London. He works out of an un-air-conditioned room in St. Mark's Church on "the avenue" for \$30,000 a year and no benefits.

Clean-cut and earnest, Wisniewski suspects he might have been able to make more money, but he feels a responsibility to the old neighborhood — he spent part of his youth in Frankford, and his mother still owns a beauty shop on the fringes of the district — and he likes the idea of restoring some of the bur-nish to a once-vibrant shopping area struggling with the recession and crime.

"It's Frankford," he explained. "It's where I'm from." Wisniewski lives in Port Richmond now. His family moved to Bucks County, where his father is a dentist.

He saw the solution to the ambassador problem during a Frankford Civic Association meeting. (He is the group's treasurer and his older brother, Brian, who works for the city, is president.) Someone from the Northeast EARN (Employee Advancement Retention Network) Center explained its programs to help people on welfare get back to work.

"It clicked," Wisniewski



said. "We could use the EARN Center for the ambassadors."

The special services district has hired a supervisor, but the four ambassadors are in an EARN program backed by federal stimulus funds. If it is not renewed in the fall, Wisniewski says other EARN programs can replace it.

The ambassadors walk their beats in pairs five days a week. They answer questions and escort shoppers or employees to their cars. They visit each business weekly to track problems. They report graffiti or broken streetlights. And, they report suspicious activity to police.

The idea is that they'll make shoppers feel safer. That will lead to more shopping and more jobs, Wisniewski said.

Lt. Robert Zaffino of the 15th Police District, which includes the special services district, is enthusiastic about the program. The area has had trouble with violent crime and "quality-of-life"

problems such as prostitution, drinking, and drug use. He thinks more uniforms on the street will keep problems in check.

"I'll tell you what, I think it can make a pretty big impact," he said. "They're our eyes and ears along Frankford Avenue when we're not there."

The ambassadors said feedback had been positive so far. They had constant offers of water and cool places to rest during last week's brutal heat.

Dominick Paolino, who owns Video Maze, said he thought the uniforms would make criminals think twice. "It's tremendously good for the avenue," he said.

Joe DiRenzo, one of the owners of a laundromat down the street that has had two armed robberies, isn't so sure. "There's too much drugs in this neighborhood," he said.

Contact staff writer Stacey Burling at 215-854-4944 or sburling@phillynews.com.

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