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Young artists' message to troubled neighborhood: Miracles can happen

By JOHN SHULTZ
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Before this summer, Joshua Stamps didn't even like to visit the place. Now he thinks the notorious 39th and Prospect intersection might figure big in his future.

One day, the 16-year-old hopes to start a lawn care business there. For now, after six weeks of mural painting and cleanup, Stamps can at least say he has made an investment in the troubled corner.

Saturday marked the closing ceremonies of "Miracle on 39th Street: A Prospect for Change," an effort driven by local businesses and community groups to put a new face on the old block.

Stamps and 100 other youths passing through the juvenile justice system were called upon to add vitality to the intersection.

They picked up litter, painted inspirational messages on sidewalks, and added their likenesses to the side of a vacant cinder block building.

Funds from Jackson County's anti-drug tax and the U.S. Department of Justice paid for the project.

At the colorful new southwest corner of the intersection, a 1969 Buick Wildcat up on blocks bears a fresh fluorescent paint job and a message for the area: "39th Street is Coming to a Change."

The project's organizers primarily hope the teens found a sense of responsibility toward their neighborhoods. They have made friends, tried their hands at art and shown dedication, braving stifling summer air to finish the job.

"I feel a lot more positive toward this community now than before," Stamps said. "And I think I can do more good for it than I did before I got locked up."

The Saturday ceremony -- with the teens vying for cash prizes in a talent competition and Mayor Kay Barnes thanking them for their efforts -- was about rewarding the youths.

But the people behind the project -- local businesspeople and community service groups -- also are looking ahead to the promise of new businesses expected to move in soon.

They share a tenuous hope that the art project will mark a turning point in the revitalization of the intersection.

"It's an icebreaker for things to come," said Ron McMillan, one of the planners of the project.

This, after all, is the intersection so infamous for its street crime that two summers ago, community leaders led by Councilman Troy Nash and the group Move Up spent 144 hours camped out there to try to reclaim the four corners for a fearful population.

Heavy police attention on the Prospect corridor -- from 27th Street to Brush Creek Boulevard -- has produced a steep drop-off in crime. Police calls are down 50 percent from 2000, when officers were dispatched there nearly four times a day.

"Overall, it was the number one call for service location in our division," East Patrol commander Maj. Barry Mayer said. "Now it's no longer in the top 100 at all."

Nash credits city efforts, ranging from the demolition of vacant eyesores to support for a Prospect corridor revitalization plan. Nash embraces projects like "Miracle on 39th" as a way to make the advances permanent.

"We need to inject as much positive activity as we can," he said. "It makes people feel better about the community in which they live."

Like McMillan, some of the project's organizers staunchly support the efforts of James Johnson, owner of the A&B Convenience Store across Prospect from the mural project. Johnson, who owns three of the intersection's four corners, plans to break ground on a new gas station and convenience store to replace his current timeworn building.

Small locally owned businesses are expected to move into the vacant buildings now marked by the teens' murals, with the project serving as a corner courtyard of sorts.

The plan is to tap into the intersection's heavy traffic. Buses make frequent stops at the corners, and the two streets are heavily traveled.

Drug dealers have long taken advantage of those factors, Mayer said.

Johnson has been a controversial figure in the neighborhood, earning criticism for selling liquor in a high-crime area. In recent weeks, though, some neighborhood associations and local church leaders have begun mending fences with him -- though they are not ready to declare that a solution for the intersection's problems.

And while they haven't signed on to Johnson's building plan specifically, they agree economic development is the key to the intersection's future.

"The people want a decent grocery store or a barber store or a drugstore," said Anna Mae Towner of the East Area Community Coalition.

"It's good to bring more businesses. We don't have anywhere to go."

Other neighborhood leaders were heartened by the murals.

"It does make the intersection look nicer," said Laura Townsend of the Ivanhoe Neighborhood Association.

Michael Toombs, one of the main organizers of "Miracle on 39th Street," was happy that the work of the young artists was embraced.

"But it's not really so much about the artwork as it about the process," said Toombs, the founder of Storytellers Inc., a collaboration of artists and educators who work to keep children out of trouble. "The process is the real enrichment -- bringing that many people together to learn a little bit about one another. Some of these kids, their spirits haven't been nurtured."

For the teens who have labored three times a week, the art serves another purpose, said Glenda Bainbridge, a supervisor with the Jackson County Family Court.

"Some of these kids, they're so angry," said Bainbridge, who said she has seen art projects work wonders in refocusing troubled teens. "It gives a constructive avenue of expression for that frustration and anger."

Stamps used a poem added to a freestanding wooden piece, painted to look like a clock, to express his hope for the future.

"It's time to see our kids in school, in church, working a job, rather than in the streets, in jail or in the cemetery," said the poem. "It's time to make a miracle happen."

To reach John Shultz, call (816) 234-4427 or send e-mail to jshultz@kcstar.com.