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## Volunteers enhance a garden in Overtown for 'beautification and jobs'

BY RODOLFO R. ROMAN  
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DANIEL BOCK / FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

September 26, 2009 – Tony Ellis, a Coca-Cola volunteer from Fort Lauderdale, pulls sod for the Roots in the City Community Garden in Overtown, Saturday, September 26. Members of the community also helped plant fruit trees and remove weeds.

On a typical Saturday, Shane Williams, 11, wakes up to watch morning cartoons and play video games.

But two weeks ago, Shane, a sixth-grader at Downtown Miami Charter, traded his video-game controller for a shovel and gloves to help plant vegetables at a garden in Overtown.

"I feel good," said Shane, who had sweat dripping down his forehead. "I am trying to help the community and make it look better."

Shane was one of more than 80 volunteers from the nearby Overtown Youth Center, Coca-Cola enterprises and the nonprofit Hands On Miami and Roots in The City who helped enhance a vegetable garden in Overtown at Northwest Third Avenue between Northwest Ninth and 10th streets.

"I am trying to make this place look beautiful," Shane said.

Volunteers helped lay sod, plant collard greens, mango, banana and orange trees as well as bougainvilleas.

The garden sprang from the imagination of Marvin Dunn, a retired Florida International University professor and founder of Roots in the City, which is based in Overtown.

"There was no place in Overtown that was beautiful for the sake of being beautiful," said

Dunn, who once lived in Overtown and now resides in Palmetto Bay. "There was no place that was green."

At one point, the two-acre lot -- which drivers can catch a glimpse of if they are headed to Miami Beach on I-395 -- had been abandoned and became a haven for crime.

The lot, which is across the street from historic Mount Zion Baptist Church, is owned by three entities: Southeast Overtown Park West Community Redevelopment Agency, the Collins Center for Public Policy and the New Providence Masonic Lodge.

Dunn started the project two years ago, planting vegetables. Funding for the project came from the city of Miami's Community Redevelopment Agency, which donated \$100,000 to help train Overtown residents in horticultural and landscaping.

Currently, the nonprofit employs eight full-time and part-time Overtown residents who maintain the garden, which also has papayas and soon will have yuca.

The garden is available to residents who can pick produce at no charge, Dunn said. Roots in the City gives a portion of the crops to Overtown residents upon request. Donations are accepted but not required, Dunn said.

Dunn hopes to grow enough produce and sell to major grocery stores with profits going to provide more jobs and maintain the garden.

"The purpose of this garden is beautification and jobs," he said.

Workers also maintain trees between Northwest Ninth and 14th streets on Third Avenue.

Tony Ellis, Miami market unit vice president for Coca-Cola, said assisting in the project opens doors to those who are less fortunate.

"What we are doing here is creating jobs for the inner city," said Ellis, whose hands were full of dirt after laying sod. "As well as creating jobs, it's a function of our corporate responsibility."

Coca-Cola supplied the sod and man power.

Volunteers helped plant nine orange trees toward the end of the garden, naming the area after the orange juice company that is part of Coca-Cola. Ellis, who came on a shuttle bus from Broward County with other volunteers, said the company donated about \$12,000 in supplies.

City of Miami Commissioner Michelle Spence-Jones said the enhancements bring a positive outlook to the area.

"This was a vacant abandoned lot where a lot of drug activity and negativity was happening," she said.

"And what we decided to do until the building era begins again, we wanted to fill it to curb the violence."

Daniella Joseph, 12, who also attends the Overtown Youth Center, part of Alonzo Mourning Charities, said the garden will be beneficial to the area.

"I feel this is good because it helps the community so we can breathe oxygen," she said.

But work in the garden is far from finished. Dunn's long-term goal: A "hundred acres and a hundred jobs in three years."

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