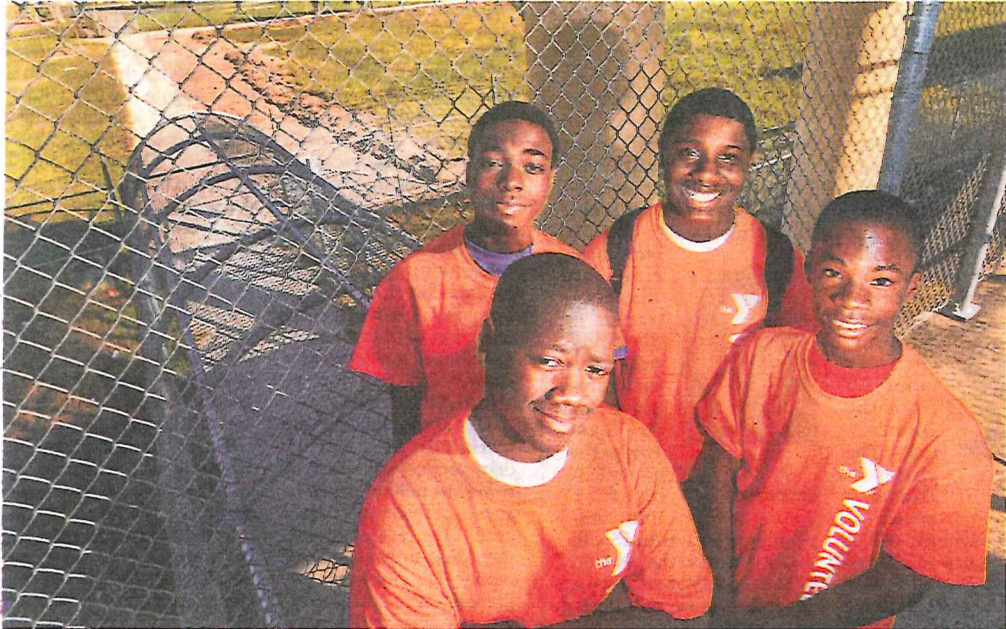


Local



JIM RASSOL/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Clockwise from front left: Eumon Roach, Jeff Noel, Kevon Bachelor and Kervens Jean-Louis were among the youths who lobbied Lauderhill officials to make improvements to an overpass on the way to their school.

Safe passage to school

By KAREN YI
Staff writer

Teens in Lauderhill are leading the way to make their community a safer place.

Tired of a dangerous walk to school that takes them across a dimly lit turnpike overpass, students banded together to urge the

city to help them secure safe passage.

"They say kids can't do a lot of things, but we did," said 14-year-old Jeff Noel, a student at Lauderhill Middle School.

Noel, along with a group of students from the Lauderhill YMCA, worked with local officials to push for the improvements. And it

worked.

A \$400,000 project has begun that will install new lighting along the Northwest 19th Street trail and add an 8-foot wide concrete walking path as well as lush greenery and additional landscaping in the area.

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WALK

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"I wanted something to change," said Noel, an eighth-grader.

Since the YMCA started working with the kids on the project a year ago, Noel said he has learned how to speak to adults. He said he'd often practice in front of a mirror so he'd be ready when he met with the mayor.

"I didn't want him to get the wrong impression of us, that we don't do right things, so that was the biggest challenge."

Quite the contrary, Mayor Richard Kaplan said he was impressed.

"Their involvement helped push it forward," he said, adding the city had been working for more than a decade to try to find funding to improve the poor conditions.

The overpass, with almost no lighting and sur-

See it

Watch a video report on the young people's efforts. SunSentinel.com/teensafety.

rounded on each side by unpaved paths, can be dangerous for students making their daily commute to and from school. Some students say gangs hang out along the path and cause fights or rob the young passers-by.

"I was going home and I was attacked there, I was a target," said Kervens Jean-Louis, who is now a freshman at Boyd H. Anderson High School. "I got jumped and I got beat up."

Jean-Louis, who is also a part of YMCA's Live Well Lauderhill, a community-led initiative working on the renovation project, said after he got jumped, he approached the YMCA with the problem and a way to fix it — through beautification.

"Anywhere I go and see a beautiful city, it's really qui-

et and the gangs don't do nothing bad to it," he said. "The art and the beauty of the city, I think, can really help."

The construction will be paid for by the city of Lauderhill, the Florida Department of Transportation and federal grant money. Once complete, the second phase will include student artwork.

"This is unique," said Dick Blatner, chairman of the Broward County YMCA. "The kids are so impressive, they have such poise and such ability to articulate their thoughts ... and I think that maybe we don't expect that of middle school kids."

And though he no longer takes the overpass to get to school, Jean-Louis says once construction is complete next year, "I'm going to make that walk proudly."

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