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Volunteers heed King's call to service at Overtown housing project

BY DAN CHRISTENSEN

By the dozens, the student volunteers converged on Miami's Town Park Village Saturday to help with the next step in its ongoing revival.

Some shoveled mulch in the Overtown housing project's parking lot, or helped to regrade the lawn. Others dug holes for donated gumbo limbo and green buttonwood trees along walkways or planted rows of green striated shrub commonly called ``mother-in-law's tongues."

"It's wonderful, really," said Juanita Lester, 69, who has lived at Town Park for 30 years. ``We need all the help we can get."

The students' landscaping energy and elbow grease was part of a national service initiative urged by President-elect Barack Obama in the run-up to Monday's Martin Luther King Jr. holiday.

The students, nearly 190 strong, came from Barry University and nearby Booker T. Washington High School and St. Francis Xavier School. They were joined by local residents and representatives from the national community service programs AmeriCorps and Local Initiatives Support Corp., or LISC.

Town Park is a nine-acre, low-rise apartment complex hard by I-395's curving exit to northbound I-95. The cooperative was built in 1970 by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Geraldine Goimbert, a local housing advocate, said the green initiative at the 147-unit Town Park began last year.

Carmen Mendez, the owner of a South Miami-Dade landscaping company that donated both plants and expertise, said the idea is to use native planting to beautify the complex and create a natural canopy for residents.

"There's no watering. No fertilizers," Mendez said. ``It will take three or four years for the canopy to grow."

The planting is the latest step in a revival that began in 2006. Since then, local advocacy groups and local corporations have combined to get leaking roofs fixed, drab and neglected buildings repainted, and barren lawns landscaped.

HOMEOWNERS

More change is coming. Residents voted earlier this week to approve switching from a co-op to a condo, a move that will allow them to own their individual units.

Housing advocates also have plans for a \$5 million rehab that would see new kitchens, bathrooms,

closets and hurricane windows for every unit, said Doug Mayer, an executive with housing charity group Carrfour Supportive Housing.

Martin Luther King Jr. Day community service was inspired by the late civil rights leader's statement that "everybody can be great because everybody can serve." Saturday's volunteers wore T-shirts emblazoned with those words.

HANDS ON MIAMI

Elsewhere on Saturday, volunteers with Hands on Miami turned out for a spruce-up at Liberty Square, one of the nation's oldest public housing communities at 1415 NW 63rd St. Residential units were repainted and trees were planted.

Volunteers also picked up litter along the Miami River at Robert King High Towers at 1407 NW Seventh St.

On Monday afternoon, young adults with AmeriCorps South Florida Urban Ministries are expected to paint benches using a theme of peace and deliver them to various locations in the community, including Edison Plaza in Little Haiti.

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