

Cops and special kids ganging up on graffiti



ADVANCE PHOTOS/IRVING SILVERSTEIN

Police Officer Adriene Carmenello and Mike Hagan of the Staten Island Developmental Center's Learn to Earn crew attack the graffiti on a building in Sunnyside.

Scrawls disappearing on Victory Blvd.

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A small battle in the war against urban decay was won in Sunnyside yesterday, as police, merchants, community leaders and a group of developmentally disabled youths launched a frontal attack on graffiti.

The initial objective was a single building on the 1000 block of Victory Boulevard. Boarded up and scarred with the scrawlings of youths, the building had become a symbol of a larger cause to area residents.

"It has a runoff effect," said Joseph Skingel, who has lived on the block for 25 years. "It would spill over into other homes, other businesses. All these homeowners take such good care of their homes. To have an eyesore like this, it's unforgivable."

Yesterday, a group of developmentally disabled youths and adults took a powerful blaster in hand and went to work scrubbing the building down.

The assault will not end there. Thanks to the efforts of three community police officers, the Learn to Earn center and the Hungerford School, the team will be put to work up and down a five-mile stretch of Victory Boulevard, cleaning as they go.

It all started when Police Officer Adriene Cermenello decided to do something to clean up the length of Victory Boulevard she patrols each day as a member of the 120th Precinct's Community Police Officer Program (CPOP).

"There's really not much of a crime wave (on the beat)," she said. "The major complaint is the disorderly youth."

Ms. Cermenello heard that two groups for developmentally disabled people, Learn to Earn and the Hungerford School, taught their students to use a graffiti-removing blaster, so she set about getting the program organized.

"She kept with it," said Sgt. Michael Nicoletti, one of the CPOP supervisors, noting the program was encouraged by Deputy Inspector Michael Pietrunti and Borough Commander Robert F. Burke.

Ms. Cermenello got area mer-

chants involved, soliciting donations of everything from cash to food for the workers and balloons to give the kick-off cleanup effort a festive air.

"The merchants are really banding together," said Officer Valerie Derbyshire. Ms. Derbyshire and Officer Gabe Perillo, whose beats also run along Victory Boulevard, joined Ms. Cermenello in her effort, lengthening the strip to be cleaned to five miles.

"The graffiti draws other kids to bring in more graffiti," said Joseph Labita, president of the Sunnyside Businessmen's Association. "It just tears down a neighborhood."

Students at the Hungerford School, which admits youths ages 16 to 21 years, and the Learn to Earn center, which takes adults over the age of 21, are trained in various skills, including use of the special blaster.

The students, who are paid for their work, spent yesterday cleaning the building and the surrounding territory. The work is part of the overall program at both centers to teach the students marketable skills.

"It's great for these guys because they have the ability to earn

money," said Richard Salinardi, job developer at the Hungerford School. "Graffiti is like the number one, also litter removal ... The demand is so great, but there's no manpower."

As Salinardi spoke, students like Tran Quang, 18, a native of Vietnam who despite his disabilities and the fact that he speaks almost no English has mastered the blasting tool, worked feverishly on the building.

Several more spots have been chosen for similar cleanups along Victory Boulevard, and police are already planning to move on to other CPOP beats when those are complete. The graffiti blaster cannot be used on private buildings but will be used on public areas.

The reaction of Sunnyside residents bodes well for the effort.

"I tell you," said resident Skingel, "this is one of the most uplifting things that has happened to this neighborhood."

Police provided the following list of merchants who donated goods or cash to the drive:

Westerleigh Wine & Liquor; Chris Christon; Margiotta Sporting Goods; Three Lil Pigs; Victory Sports; Clark's House of Flowers; Speedy Sign-A-Rama USA; Shamrock Paints, Inc.; Laura J. Amann, DDS; A&P Supermarket; Trubia's Meats, Inc.; Window Headquarters; Victory Gourmet; Alfonso's Bakery; Finishing Touch; Doody's Home Improvement; Impressions Photography; Hot Bagels & Stuff; Clove Lake Pizzeria, and Natural Hair Replacement.



The graffiti blaster is manned by, left to right, Bobby Eakman of Learn to Earn, and Tran Quang and William Costanzo of the Hungerford School.