

Helping to put parents' minds at ease

A safety village

By AMY LAVAREZ
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Recent headlines have put parents on the edge of their seats when it comes to their child's safety. It seems that a visit from good ol' Officer Friendly is just not enough to guarantee that a child will make it safely across the street.

That's why South Dade's Officer Friendly is taking a new approach in teaching stranger danger and traffic safety.

Safety Traffic Officer Marie Kent of the Homestead Police Department proposed and recently received approval for a Children's Safety Village.

The village, to be built in Tatum Park on Southwest Eighth Street and Flagler Avenue, will be a replica of downtown Homestead and provide a fun and safe environment for children to put into practice Officer Friendly's safety rules.

Complete with traffic lights, crosswalks and shopping centers, the model will cover 9,000 square feet, leaving ample space for restrooms, picnic tables and a playground.

"It's a lot of work," said Kent, who has worked with HPD for more than 13 years and is currently the only officer overseeing the project. "But I'm hoping that people will understand that this is a community project and we need everyone's help."

South Dade High School's Advanced Architecture students are among the many supporters of this project. They will be submitting designs for the village to be reviewed by architects Robert Barnes and Jimmy Harris.

"We are hoping to make the village a combination of the students designs," said Barnes, who has been employing SDHS graduates for several years.

"I've been impressed with the students in the past and I'm confident that they'll do a great job."

North Miami Beach is home to the only other village of its kind. Its success prompted Kent's plan for the building of a miniature city in Homestead catering to children over the age of three up until the age of nine.

"Smaller kids have a rather short attention span but I think taking them outside of the classroom would spark their interest,"



PHOTO BY AMY ALVAREZ

KID SAFETY PROMOTERS — South Dade architect Robert Barnes and HPD officer Marie Kent are working together on a program that will help to ensure the safety of youngsters.

said Kent, "and having kids of my own I've learned that hands-on is the most effective way to teach."

Younger children will learn about walking on the sidewalk and crossing the streets with the aid of coloring books and big-wheels. The older kids are taught bicycle and automobile safety while touring the village on go-carts.

The project is sponsored by HPD and funded by private and public grants and private donations are welcome. Any money not used for the initial building of the village will be placed in the Safety Village Building fund to be used for future repairs.

Kent is hoping to get 'downtown Homestead' up and running by the start of the upcoming school year.