

Harlem Unites to Tame Traffic

In early 2008 Community Pride, a program of Harlem Children's Zone, Inc., launched a Safer Streets and Sidewalks Campaign to address traffic issues in their community, winning a resolution passed with unanimous support from Community Board 10.



Gwen Kash is a Community Organizer with Community Pride.



Curtis Still is Co-Chair of the Transportation/Parks and Recreation Committee of Manhattan Community Board 10.

TakeAction!

Live or work in Harlem and want to get involved in the Safer Streets and Sidewalk Campaign? Contact Community Pride at 212-932-1920.

What is the traffic situation in Community Board 10?

Curtis Still (CS): CB10 is extremely congested. 125th Street is a virtual parking lot. Major streets in the district are dangerous because no one pays attention to the speed limit. I recently heard that the average vehicle speeds on Lenox Avenue are 40-45 miles per hour. It's pretty bad.

Gwen Kash (GK): Harlem is a residential community with many children and senior citizens. However, due to the wide width of our streets and our proximity to numerous bridges and highways, a lot of traffic passes through the neighborhood at unsafe speeds.

Why was starting a Safer Streets and Sidewalks Campaign necessary?

GK: As a community organizer, several groups approached me with concerns about speeding on their blocks and the difficulties they had encountered. One group had been trying to get speed humps installed in front of an elementary school on 144th Street for fifteen years! We brought together many different groups who had been struggling alone. Our vision for the long term is to see pedestrian and cyclist safety addressed by a neighborhood-wide strategic plan that the community has helped to formulate, rather than by improvements to one intersection at a time.

What made you feel that traffic safety was an important issue to the neighborhood?

CS: Community Pride showed us statistics on fatalities in the area and the numbers were staggering, especially for children. I hadn't realized the rate of fatalities was that high. Aside from the numbers, I can see the traffic problem because I live in Harlem and I used to work at the Kennedy Center with seniors who couldn't cross 135th Street because of the traffic. I was there when a nurse who worked at the Center was killed by a car. A few years ago I saw a crash that was like a war zone. I know how dangerous the streets are but when you see the numbers on paper the realization hits you.

How did Safer Streets and Sidewalks get started?

GK: Community Pride officially kicked off the Initiative with a town hall meeting with community members and the Department of Transportation. We discussed our common problems, brainstormed solutions, and decided on priorities. Our top goals were improved

signage, longer crossing times for pedestrians, instituting leading pedestrian intervals (LPIs) and installing a controlled crosswalk at a particularly dangerous T intersection on 135th Street that connects an elementary school, a park, a hospital, a senior center, a community center and a recreation center.

The board unanimously passed a safer streets resolution. How did this happen?

CS: We decided to write the resolution when we heard the numbers on crashes and fatalities. Many Board members live in the community, so hearing these statistics created a dialogue around what people had seen and how nothing had happened to improve traffic problems in the past.

T.A.: Why is this an important campaign for the neighborhood?

CS: There is more of a consciousness around health issues in the community now; people have always cared about health but it's like there is now a perfect storm around asthma, obesity and transportation issues. When we talk about what to do, safer streets should make for more opportunities for physical activities; bike lanes allow people to be more active.

T.A.: What are some successes you've had?

GK: Our biggest success so far has been building a community consensus about what type of streets we want, and demonstrating how broad that support is. More than 1,000 community members signed our petition, and CB 10 unanimously passed a resolution in favor of the solutions we are proposing. The DOT already made some changes, including increasing signage around schools, instituting longer crossing times and LPIs at some intersections, installing speed humps in front of two neighborhood schools and approving speed humps for two others. They have also committed to doing the studies necessary to get many of our other goals moving.

T.A.: What do you think was the key to winning community support for safer streets?

GK: The most important factor for gaining the support was making sure that we based our goals on community members' expertise about and hopes for their own neighborhood. Most people in Harlem already know that the streets are unsafe for pedestrians because they walk in them every day! □