

Opa-locka students learn first-hand what it takes to run a city

BY HELEN BERGGREN
Special to The Miami Herald



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Opa-locka City Mayor Joseph L. Kelley gathers with the mock city council from Nathan B. Young during Government Week in Opa-locka on Tuesday, Oct. 20, 2009.

Opa-locka residents peering into Historic City Hall may have been surprised by the pint-sized politicians reigning over their city last week.

But the city's highest elected official wasn't worried about losing his seat to these political newbies -- he invited them.

Mayor Joseph L. Kelley welcomed local fifth-graders from Nathan B. Young and Dr. Robert B. Ingram elementary schools on Oct. 20 to preside over a mock city meeting as part of Government Week.

“Most kids today are disconnected with civics in school,” he said. “Hopefully this hands-on experience teaches them how government affects

them individually. And more importantly, how they can affect public policy.”

Handing over his gavel for the day, Kelley guided the students through the civic process about how to turn an idea into law.

The lesson grabbed their attention when the mock agenda turned to a universal issue affecting pre-teens: Should there be a curfew ordinance for the youth in Opa-locka?

At the morning session, Nathan B. Young students portrayed council members and constituents. In the afternoon, Ingram students did the same.

During the morning citizens' forum, some students spoke against the time constraints citing a need to be with friends and more free time for play.

But not everyone agreed.

“Kids should have a curfew,” said Abram Simpson, his voice shaking. “If they go to bed earlier, they can wake up better. Sleep makes their brain work better. It gets your head right.”

Straining to see over the dais, officials agreed that a curfew was a good thing but could not agree on a specific time and the motion died for lack of a second.

But Vice Mayor Jelah Jenkins refused to let the time resolution just tick away.

Making her plea for 7:30 p.m. curfew, Jelah convinced her fellow commissioners to see the value of an early curfew and to vote again.

“Kids should be in the house by 7:30 because a lot of things happen in Opa-locka after dark,” Jelah said.

The reasoning drew a motion from Commissioner Christopher Young, a second from Commissioner Tyasia Campbell, and the ordinance passed unanimously, 5-0.

“You have passed legislation and now it is law,” Kelley said.

Jelah, a cheerleader, soon realized her error after Kelley pointed out the consequences of the 7:30 p.m. curfew for students who play sports.

“Cheerleading practice isn't over until 8 o'clock,” the 10-year-old from Nathan B. Young said, sighing.

But the seasoned city official saw a possible political solution.

“Making a decision when everybody is not happy can bring pressure,” Kelley said. “I can already see them rescinding the ordinance at the next meeting.”