Wielding paint brushes and brooms, a group of City Heights residents began taking back their neighborhood yesterday.

But before they swept cigarette butts and painted out of graffiti, about 75 children and adults carrying signs that read "Paint a Child's Future" and "Planting the Seeds for Our Future" gathered for a rally on 44th Street near University Avenue.

There, under a hot April sun, community leaders and politicians issued motivational statements about the importance of cleaning up the area.

"Fighting crime is working with neighbors to clean up the blight . . . block by block to take back the neighborhood," said Rep. Bob Filner, D-Chula Vista.

Anna Daniels, president of the City Heights Community Development Corporation board, introduced 6-year-old Frank Liazarraga, who drew the picture on the buttons Daniels handed out to participants. She told him she expected him to be a leader some day.

The button, labeled "Painting a new future, Vecinos Unidos (Neighbors United)," features four suns with smiling faces above a green and orange house.

"Our children expect that there's going to be a safe world with people with smiles on their faces," Daniels said. "We owe it to them to create a world that doesn't let them down."

To the group of residents gathered outside an apartment building on 44th Street, Daniels asked: "Are we going to let Frank down?"

The answer was a resounding "No."

While some of the children stayed behind for a storytelling, others began painting over spray-painted walls and fences. One 6-year-old named Demetrius was soon speckled head to toe with white paint.

"If you can't get it on even, try doing it sideways, OK?" Susan Ringo, captain of the Neighborhood Watch Program, said to her young helpers. "Try not to get too much paint on the sidewalk."

Dehr Pickett, 25, a resident of the Friends of Russell Latimer Program, was among the painters. Originally from St. Louis, Pickett said he participated in similar efforts back
"Clean up the community, stop the gangs messing up the streets, the drugs," he said. "It makes me feel good to help others."

Caption: 2 PICS
1. Brushwork: Painting over a graffiti-marred fence are volunteers in a City Heights cleanup project. 2. Rally-bound: Robert Clark, 5, leads a march to a rally before the cleanup effort. 1,2. Union-Tribune / JIM BAIRD

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