

ORANGE COUNTY PERSPECTIVE

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A Walk for Diversity

The changing face of Orange County is ever more apparent. The percentage of whites is decreasing; the percentage of Latinos and Asians is increasing. Dozens of languages echo in classrooms and on the streets.

Adapting to change can be difficult. Some residents tell pollsters they are reluctant to keep up their old routines, unwilling to walk around the block or down a supermarket aisle and meet new neighbors who look different. But others embrace the new makeup of the county, trying to understand what separates them from newcomers and what unites them.

A decade ago, nine Huntington Beach students discussed prejudice and hate in a county that was 78% white. The Ocean View High School students began planning with school officials and the Orange County Human Relations Commission for an inaugural high school symposium on diversity. About 60 students from Ocean View and nearby schools attended.

That gathering led to what has become an annual event dubbed "Walk in My Shoes." This year's session, held last month, drew 600 high school students and educators to the Cal State Fullerton campus to discuss changes in a county where the white population now numbers 58%.

In recent years, similar seminars have been offered to middle school students. That's a realistic recognition that younger students also can benefit from learning about the people who make up Orange County.

The conferences feature various techniques to get students to discuss their backgrounds and cultures. In one workshop this year, teenagers sculpted clay figures that symbolized their heritage. One created a pyramid, representing his birthplace, Egypt. Another carved a dragon's head, representing her Chinese roots.

English teacher Gayle Byrne, who helped start the first conference at Ocean View, says the annual conferences need to be supplemented by on-campus diversity clubs and race relations forums. She expressed concern that

many schools touch on relations among different ethnic groups only lightly rather than committing themselves to building tolerance.

That suggests the value of the conferences. Tina Fernandez, director of the "Walk in My Shoes" program and coordinator of the first conference, credits them with giving students a safe setting for revealing assumptions about each other.

Two days after the meeting of high school students, a group of Asian Americans convened a leadership summit at Santa Ana College to discuss how to ensure that county residents see them as full-fledged Americans.



Rusty Kennedy works for tolerance.

J.D. Hokoyama, president of the group holding the conference, Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, noted that the stereotype of Orange County as a "haven of upper-middle-class whites" has been breaking down. Hokoyama and others plan to start a leadership program in the county next year to train Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in community activism.

One organization that deserves credit for developing programs to foster tolerance is the Orange County Human Relations Commission. The commission's executive director, Rusty Kennedy, said conferences and school outreach programs have helped hold the line on hate-related crimes in Orange County. Kennedy said the increasing size and diversity of the county's population would make it likely that the number of hate crimes would increase. Instead, the number has held about steady for the past six years. Kennedy said the number of hate crimes rose from 126 in 1991 to 188 the following year, probably because of increased community awareness about how to report such incidents.

It does no good to sweep hate crimes, or any crimes, under the rug. Shining a light on what's going on in the community can help lead to problem solving. Orange County residents should learn about their neighbors and adapt to a changing ethnic makeup, valuing it as a strength to have a mix of different cultures and beliefs.