

ORANGE COUNTY PERSPECTIVE



Human Relations Panel Is Still Rising to Challenges

The Commission's Work Deserves Continued Support

A reward for foresight should go to the members of the Orange County Board of Supervisors who 25 years ago recognized the need for a Human Relations Commission, established it and provided the money. The need for the commission is even greater today; so is the need to keep providing it with the clout it derives from being an official county agency.

The commission often has found itself in trouble at budget time, as supervisors juggle competing demands for funds. Last year, after the bankruptcy, there were murmurs about casting the agency adrift. Wisdom prevailed; the agency continued to receive county funds, but was cut to \$106,000. That is only one-third the amount it received in 1990.

But if the county's funding of the commission has shrunk, the agency's tasks have not.

Ten days ago, the commission released its annual report on hate crimes in Orange County, those crimes in which a victim is singled out because of his or her race, ethnic background or religion. Although the number of hate crimes in the county declined last year to 175, from 182 in 1994, the report was depressing.

There was an increase in attacks on African American residents, who account for only 2% of the population. The commission's executive director, Rusty Kennedy, said part of the reason for the increase was white anger at the acquittal of O.J. Simpson on charges of murdering his ex-wife, Nicole, and her friend, Ron Goldman.

Commission officials said outside events often have an impact on Orange County, which demonstrates that the county is not an isolated enclave free from external influence. For instance, anger at Latinos increased during the debate over Proposition 187, which sought to end benefits for illegal immigrants. When the military and Congress were debating a new policy on treatment of homosexuals in the armed forces, attacks on gays in Orange County increased.

Those types of connections are important, and making them is one of the commission's valuable tasks. But it is far from the only one.

Last month the Orange County Korean

American Assn. asked for help in looking into the circumstances surrounding the Feb. 14 fatal shooting of a South Korean, Hong Il Kim, after a high-speed chase that ended in an Orange mall parking lot. The merchants were concerned that police might have been quicker to fire because of Kim's race. Kennedy moderated a one-hour meeting between the Korean group and the police chief of Orange, John R. Robertson.

Robertson told association members that he could not comment on specifics until the investigation by the Orange County district attorney's office is complete. That is understandable, as was the Koreans' frustration at a lack of immediate answers. But association members said they did appreciate the chief's willingness to meet with them and hear their concerns. Robertson said his officers were trained to treat all people with dignity and respect, regardless of their ethnic background. He said Kim's race did not play a part in the shooting.

The Human Relations Commission has also done good work in teaching students in the county how to get along. Several principals have asked for commission assistance at the first sign of racial friction on campus, rather than waiting for violence to occur.

For every dollar the commission gets from the county this year, it gets another six from grants, corporate donations and fees paid by cities that take part in its programs. That is laudable recognition of the need for the agency.

Supervisor Jim Silva recognized the good work of the commission and the need for its existence last month. But he said he would like to see the county stop funding it. That would be a mistake.

The commission gets more legitimacy from being a taxpayer-funded arm of county government than it would from being merely a private, nonprofit organization. Private nonprofits do good work; so would the commission in that form. But its stature is enhanced by being viewed as a part of the county, a view that police departments, schools and private companies have shared for more than two decades.