

ORANGE COUNTY PERSPECTIVE

Huntington Students Take Big Step With Walk for Peace

Rise in hate crimes underscores need for such displays

The hundreds of Huntington Beach High School students who recently marched down Main Street to promote nonviolence deserve credit for recognizing a major problem of our society—how we all get along—and trying to address it.

Equally deserving were the various organizations that helped plan and promote the "Walk for Peace." An event that large does not occur spontaneously. City officials, the Police Department, the school's parent-teacher group and the Orange County Human Relations Commission all helped plan the third annual "Peace Week." The walk down Main Street, an inaugural event that deserves to be repeated, was a feature of the week.

A planner of Peace Week said that students, parents and teachers met before the events to examine their own stereotypes and prejudices. They also discussed how to reach out to students in all groups, not just the ones who usually plan things on campus.

School Principal Jim Staunton said the objective of the Walk for Peace was to get the students to recognize that they are dependent on each other. He also rightly praised the students for "taking the time to do something that's so meaningful."

A day after the walk, the Human Relations Commission released its annual compilation of hate crimes and incidents. The depressing document showed how necessary are events like Peace Week and how much the county's young people need to be educated in tolerance.

Hate crimes and incidents are those instigated at least partly because of a victim's race, gender, religion or sexual orientation. After a slight decline in recent years, the 1996 tally rose again, with a total of 183, the highest since the 1992 figure of 188.

The incidents can range from scrawling a swastika on a piece of paper and putting it on the car of a Jewish family to shouting a slur at a

Latino. The crimes have included beatings and, in some cases, killings.

Last year, a Native American, 20 years old, was stabbed and seriously wounded in Huntington Beach, allegedly by a proclaimed klansman who police said asked whether the victim believed in "white power."

A Vietnamese American who had been a student leader at UCLA was fatally stabbed on a Tustin High School tennis court. The assailant was an alleged white supremacist.

The executive director of the Human Relations Commission, Rusty Kennedy, said an especially disturbing aspect of last year's hate

crimes and incidents was the high number targeting African Americans, who constitute only 2% of the county's population.

African Americans were the object of a reported 53 incidents across the county, well over one-third of the total. Leaders of the county's African American community said they were not surprised by the figure.

Changing attitudes and behavior will require a concerted effort from all segments of the community. Religious leaders, elected officials, schoolteachers and, especially, par-

ents, need to realize the gravity of the problem and work to lessen it.

Orange County continues to become more and more diverse, shedding its old homogeneity. People rub shoulders in the classroom, supermarket and office. They need to respect each other's religion, race and culture. They need to learn more about each other and reach out to those who may be strangers.

That's what the Huntington Beach High School students who took part in the Walk for Peace realized. Students said members of different groups on campus who previously ignored each other were talking. That's progress. Dialogue across racial, religious and gender lines is needed to ensure that tolerance replaces violence.



Evelyn Arredondo participated in the walk.