

# Metro

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## BOARD TO MARK 25 YEARS OF MAKING CULTURES COME TOGETHER

**ORGANIZATIONS:** The Orange County Human Relations Commission is still building bridges.

By **JOHN HUGHES**  
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On a recent school day, the executive director of the Orange County Human Relations Commission accompanied an American Indian father and son to a meeting with the boy's principal at a fundamental school.

The student was in trouble at school because his hair was too long. The father went to Rusty Kennedy for help.

His son, the father said, was intent on obeying school rules, but cutting his hair contradicted his religious heritage.

Kennedy helped mediate a discussion on how the boy could honor his heritage while conforming to the policies of an institution founded on discipline and a demanding code of conduct.

It is not a glamorous example of Kennedy's work, but standing between cultural differences — whether a haircut or hate crimes — exactly defines the spirit of the commission, which celebrates 25 years at its awards banquet Sunday night.

In 1971, when the Orange County Board of Supervisors was considering whether to establish a human relations commission,

the Orange County Police Chiefs and Sheriff's Association lobbied strongly against it. Such a group, the law enforcement association contended, would be little more than a review board hampering police work.

In 1996, an Orange County police chief, Pat McKinley of Fullerton, waited at a Board of Supervisors meeting for four hours to praise the work of that same group his professional organization had once opposed.

Those two meetings are the bookends of 25 years of action, education and changes that have shaped the commission as it helps shape its ever-changing county.

At the time it was formed, much of the commission's focus was to mediate employment-discrimination disputes between primarily white business owners and minority employees.

Now the commission is only tangentially involved in job disputes (that's the work of the Department of Fair Employment and Housing). It is, however,

squarely in the middle of trying to make Orange County a more decent place to live.

The commission works primarily as a facilitating agency, finding people with solutions for people with problems. It has been a link between police departments and community activists and has sponsored living-room discussions in neighborhoods where a lack of communication led to misunderstandings.

Recently the commission has focused much of its energy on documenting hate crimes.

As the county has changed, so has the commission and its outgrowth group, the Orange County Human Relations Council. Its employees and volunteer staff reflect the ethnic diversity that followed the "white flight" large-

ly responsible for the county's growth:

Becky Esparaza, a volunteer and the commission's board president, got involved when she saw trouble in her community, including the drive-by shooting of her son.

The emergence of diverse racial and ethnic groups has produced tensions no one might have predicted when the commission began, Kennedy says. Even the county's bankruptcy had an effect on how disparate groups feel about each other, and so a current focus of the commission is in "anger management."

"Doing things that build understanding among young people is a priority," Kennedy says from the commission's Santa Ana offices, where children's colorful art hangs over rows of paperwork on institutional desks.

It is the goal of "Bridges: A School Inter-Ethnic Relations Program" — a program begun by the commission — to encourage better understanding among multicultural groups.

Human relations specialists (employed through the Human Relations Council, a not-for-profit organization) work through schools to offer multicultural retreats in which young people are encouraged to educate other young people about unique aspects of their heritage and culture.

"One thing that gives me a sense that my daughter and son will have a better (social) situation is the School Inter-Ethnic Relations Program," Kennedy says.



Until 1991 the Human Relations Commission, with six full-time employees, was completely funded by the county.

Currently, the county contributes \$106,000, which includes Kennedy's salary. (That's down from \$300,000 in 1991.) Two other commission employees are paid through a court grant.

Much of the work, Kennedy says, is done by 20 volunteer mediators with support from 40 board member/partners.

Orange County, Kennedy says, is still "a better place for some than for others. It is more comfortable for whites than blacks."

But Kennedy points out that only 30 years ago a majority of Orange County voters called for a repeal of the Fair Housing Act.

"Today there's no question in my mind that 95 percent of Orange County would agree that it's wrong to discriminate because of race or ethnicity."

**KENNEDY**