

ORANGE COUNTY

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Human Relations Panel Honors Youths' Activism

By LISA RICHARDSON
TIMES STAFF WRITER

E.J. Liao moved from Taiwan to Huntington Beach four years ago and thought the place was great—people were warm and welcoming and he saw no sign of ethnic tension.

But that was before the high school junior was fluent in English.

"Everyone was smiling at me, so I thought they were really nice," he said. "But as my English got better I began to really understand what people were saying and to realize there were problems."

Liao, along with classmate Anni Kernan, will be honored tonight by county leaders for founding the Student Human Relations Committee at Marina High School and "spending hours of their time promoting a more tolerant environ-

ment."

"There were international groups here that would have days to serve different foods," said Liao, 17. "But our human-relations specialist told me that people don't hate or dislike each other because they don't like the food, but because we don't have chance to sit down with each other. We create a safe environment for them to sit down to talk about controversial issues and their personal experiences."

Liao and Kernan are among six youths to be honored tonight at the 24th annual county Human Relations Commission banquet. It is the first time since Orange County began honoring residents who lead the struggle against intolerance that so many young people have been honored.

Commission Executive Director Rusty Kennedy said the selection of five high school students and one college student signals not only a new effort to include young people, but also a recognition that increasingly, the social problems, cultural conflicts and racial hostilities in their school lives have forced students to emerge as leaders.

"There's not a school in Orange County that has not experienced dramatic change in its ethnic makeup over the last decade," Kennedy said. "Some have taken comprehensive steps to deal with the changes and others have not," he said. "But ethnic relations is on the agenda of every middle school and high school in the county."

At Irvine High School, students noticed that integration and interracial harmony broke down every day at noon, when white, Asian, Latino and African American students separated to eat lunch with their own ethnic groups, according to commission award winner Andrea Zelinko.



GERALDINE WILKINS/ Los Angeles Times

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TOLERANCE:

Panel Honors Activism by Six Youths

Zelinko, 17, and classmate Ming Hsu, 17, will receive awards for their work with the school's Human Relations Forum in bringing diverse groups of students, parents and teachers together.

"There was kind of an atmosphere of intimidation because you didn't know if you were going to be rejected or accepted if you went over to a different group," Zelinko said. "But our whole goal is to get people to realize there are different cultural and religious differences, as well as racial and gender differences, to sort of create an atmosphere of respect."

The other student honorees are Christina Gonzales of Saddleback High School, who has overcome the shooting deaths of friends and other hardships to become, according to the commission, "an outstanding volunteer . . . and a leader [who] will be the first in her family to attend college."

Carah Reed, a student at Chapman University, will receive an award because she "devotes her life to eradicating violence and prejudice among young people." Reed volunteers as a conflict mediator and has set up a mentorship program for black high school students and Chapman University students.

The accomplishments of the other award winners are as varied as the social, health and educational needs in the county. They have worked to feed and house homeless people, stop domestic violence, aid refugees, fight AIDS and minister to families to better their quality of life.

They are:

- Maria Eva Arreola of Santa Ana, the first parent to be elected president of the Fairhaven Elementary PTA who speaks only Spanish. The commission lauded Arreola for shattering stereotypes of "marginalized non-English-speaking parents."

- Sam Boyce, late founder of Street People In Need, which has served more than 88,000 meals to homeless people of Orange County and also runs a substance-abuse program. Boyce died in 1994.

- Ban Binh Bui, of Irvine, the volunteer president of the Vietnamese Community of Southern



BOB GRIESER / Los Angeles Times

Andrea Zelinko says her high school group hopes to "create an atmosphere of respect."

California. He helps newcomers adjust to life in the United States. He organizes English classes, job training seminars and culture-shock workshops.

- Sandra Kay Condello, of San Clemente, a leader in the battle against domestic violence. Under the auspices of the South Orange County Community Services Council, she led the effort to build a battered-women's shelter, Laura's House.

- Rifka Hirsh, of Huntington Beach, who has helped build the Cambodian Family into a full-service community center for Vietnamese refugees during the past 13 years, providing services such as English classes and family counseling programs.

- Merritt Johnson of Irvine, the president of Orange County's United Way program, has brought together numerous community organizations to form partnerships with the United Way. During his tenure, local donations to the group have increased almost tenfold.

- Janet Jue, a teacher at Fountain Valley High School, who was praised by the commission as a "voice for tolerance and multicultural understanding. As a teacher,

mentor, mediator, confidant and volunteer, she puts kids first and makes a real difference."

- Barbara Muirhead of Fullerton, the coordinator of the Federation of Gay and Lesbian Leadership in Orange County. Muirhead serves on Orange County Together, and the commission described him as a "pivotal leader in the lesbian and gay community."

- Tim Mullins of Tustin, the director of mental health for the county Health Care Agency. He was cited for work to build an organization that is "a leader in providing culturally competent care to diverse clients."

- Lt. Luis Ochoa, a Santa Ana police officer who helped rid the city's Oak View area of gang activity, and leads his department in an effort to improve cultural sensitivity.

- Jim Oregel of Anaheim, one of the founders of the Orange County Congregation Community Organization, a multiethnic interfaith group. He also serves as a booster to Anaheim High School and is on the board of St. Boniface Drop-In Center.

- Al Roberts of Laguna Beach, president of the AIDS Service Foundation and a founding board member who has led fund-raising efforts. The commission called him a "seldom-recognized hero to people fighting AIDS."

- Barbara Rosenbaum of San Juan Capistrano and Gloria Sall of Dana Point, who run the Green Circle program for inter-ethnic understanding for elementary schoolchildren in South County. Both women are trained mediators and provide conflict-resolution and mediation programs to schools throughout the county.

- Eugene Wheeler of Lake Forest, founding president of 100 Black Men, a nonprofit organization of professional men who mentor young black men. The commission recognized Wheeler's work, noting that "In this capacity he has found himself hurdled forward as one of the most outspoken leaders of the beleaguered African American community in Orange County."