

Fullerton Students, Administrators Working to Build Unity

"When he got shot, it really had a sobering effect," said Otto Salzer Jr., a 17-year-old junior. "It showed us what racism can be and how easily someone can die like that. Five minutes ago, you're at school and then you're bleeding on the concrete."

From tragedy came the opportunity for school officials who had already realized that cultural awareness didn't necessarily produce harmony.

"We had to change our focus," said Shaw, the principal for almost five years. "We really wanted to go beyond awareness into acceptance—accepting differences, but celebrating the similarities."

After the shooting, they tried again, launching a multicultural task force of about 12 students assigned to promote harmony. That effort sputtered the first school year and was jump-started again in the fall of 1993 after Assistant Principal Donald J. Morrison drew on the energy of a larger group of students.

The group recently staged an assembly on ethnic diversity with sessions that included the speech of a Santa Ana police officer who immigrated from Mexico. Many of the students have also gone on

field trips to UC Irvine for more lessons on the issue of ethnic diversity.

Marilyn Ramirez, an original member of the group, said its first task was to reassure the Vietnamese students who feared reprisals in the wake of the shooting.

"We tried to tell them that we can't be angry with each other and that the student's death wasn't in vain," she said. "We tried to make the kids aware of the things that they say, to avoid calling each other names. I think we've achieved that, but we still have our little cliques, our little groups. And we want them to come out and mingle."

Mingling 101 has proved to be the hardest test of all. School officials and students have experimented with a variety of strategies.

For instance, the principal formed a music committee amid complaints from students that the lunchtime deejay was spinning tapes a little heavy on the rock 'n' roll and a little light on the *quebradita* music. School officials had already noticed that lunchtime music had a way of bringing students together.

The chief yearbook photographer made a calculated effort to snap photographs of every ethnic group, rather than the usual roundup of the 100 most popular people on campus. And the campus newspaper even started publishing a Spanish translation of some local news.

Initially, some white students balked at the translations, according to Mike Fillmore, a senior who writes for the newspaper.

"They didn't think it was right," he said. "A number of people were, like, 'Hey you're in America. Learn English. How are you going to get ahead without it?' But that's died down."

Along with those efforts, the school and the Human Relations Commission organized retreats of small groups, who met together away from school where they could speak more candidly. Top school officials, including the principal, also participated.

So did a wide variety of students who represented the traditional spectrum of campus life—the varsity jock and the cheerleader, the Eagle Scout and the student activist, the newcomer and the graduating senior.

At the start of a session last week, the students were quiet and shy, but then grew more animated as they shared tales about family rituals and customs. Students who barely glanced at one other in the hallways nodded in recognition as they listened to common stories of divorced parents and reconstituted families.

Tentative friendships bloomed like spring buds.

Before they talked, Laura Melgoza looked at black sports star

Christopher Young in the hallways and labeled him a "stuck-up" athlete. And then she listened to his memories of the slurs that scornful white fans screamed while he dribbled a basketball.

Before they talked, Valerie McQueen—one of the new black students at Fullerton—sized up Marilyn Rodriguez as a prim and distant student leader who hung out with the preppy crowd. And then she heard Marilyn's memories of how she and her Mexican immigrant grandparents fled a restaurant that had shunned them, refusing service.

"I thought to myself, 'That's true, I can identify with that,'" said McQueen. "Maybe we do have something in common and I can talk to her now. I later went up to her and told her I was sorry if I was rude because I thought you were a snob. She's really nice."

As a school bus rumbled outside to carry the students away, the words came out in such torrents that Principal Shaw and Assistant Principal Morrison agreed to bring the same group together again to hammer out a specific strategy of activities to mix the students.

But nothing had a more powerful effect than a spontaneous act the next day.

It was the sight of "Mr. Morris," tall and imposing, stumbling through the quick steps of the *quebradita*.

"He was dancing to Mexican music! Everybody was amazed and laughing because it was Mr. Morris, an authority figure," Solis said. "Personally, I hate that music because it bugs me. But his dancing showed me many things. He's a person who cares about us and our school. He doesn't want racial barriers."

There were 15 students dancing when Morrison joined. And when the music stopped, there were 25.

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peace monitors in yellow badges roam the sunlit corridors, primed for a "911" call to offer healing words that can prevent a spat between rival suitors from turning into a Bosnia-sized misunderstanding.

Periodically, a few students are pried from cliques in the lunch quad for six-hour sessions organized by the County Human Relations Commission, which feature pizza and intimate conversation that wanders from family rituals to detailed descriptions of discrimination.

The talk is part of a calculated strategy to promote harmony at Fullerton, where the climate grew so tense after the shooting that at times some students feared to look at each other, let alone offer greetings.

After the words of one draining session faded away last week, it was clear that every one of the 30 student participants—black, white, Asian and Latino—had at some point in their lives felt the pain of prejudice.

A white junior recalled the hazing of his freshman year when, he said, he was targeted for regular beatings by Latino students. A Cambodian girl recalled the "mad-dogging" hate stares of Latino students who, she said, shoved Asian girls. A student of Mexican descent insisted that six weeks ago he heard the unmistakable whisper of a teacher softly cursing "typical Mexicans."

"We have a long way to go," conceded Principal Ed Shaw as he sat last week amid a circle of students who seemed reluctant to stop talking. "We're not there yet, but we're committed to promoting ethnic diversity."

Five years ago, as Fullerton's population started to shift, the school began trying to promote cultural awareness by hosting dances, ethnic food days and celebrations for holidays such as Cinco de Mayo.

But most of the students didn't need a festival to inform them that ethnic minorities had become the majority population of the school. Latinos make up 48% of the population this year, and Asians comprise another 10%.



Edith Carillo opens up during retreat discussion with, from left, Mike Fillmore, Jeannette Inzunza, Melissa Nazari and Christopher Young.

What they needed was an invitation to mingle.

At lunchtime, different ethnic groups segregated themselves in the main quad like delegations at the United Nations. And the school's elite was dominated by white students who published the yearbook and the newspaper, ran the government, led the cheers and danced at the proms.

"I've never even bought a yearbook since I've been here three years," said Laura Melgoza, a Fullerton junior and daughter of Mexican immigrants. "Why buy one if I don't know any of the people in the pictures?"

Then came the shooting of Angel Gonzalez as he walked home on a Friday afternoon in September of 1992, about a block south of the campus. Witnesses said he was jumped, beaten and then shot twice in the back by four to six Asian youths who shouted racial slurs at him.

Solis said he heard the crack of gunfire as he sat in the school's

detention office. He dismissed the noise as a backfiring car. Then someone rushed into the room, ordering everyone out.

In the street, tearful girls stumbled away from the whirling lights of a growing collection of police cars. And Solis remembered back to the squabble three hours earlier at McDonald's when slurs were the weapon of choice.

Eventually, five Asian youths were charged in connection with the slaying, including a 15-year-old Vietnamese sophomore from Fullerton High School.

Later, the campus flag would droop to half-staff. Students would don T-shirts with Gonzalez's name and the epitaph "rest in peace." But in their own small community peace was elusive.

Some of the Asian students said they were afraid to stray near the Latinos, even though some students tried doubly hard to be friendly to the Asians. Vaty Mousa, the daughter of Cambodian immigrants, remembers the bullying questions of some Latino teens, who provoked tears with fresh insults and slurs that were popular during World War II.