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Three teachers honored for promoting tolerance

Ideas they use to engage students include invitations to share pizza, leading diversity programs and getting rivals to talk.

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A math teacher at Fountain Valley High School uses pizza to help students connect with one another. A middle school physical education teacher in Placentia got competing student groups together to talk. A high school history teacher in Anaheim led teens to give more than 100 presentations on diversity this year.

All three teachers were recognized at an award ceremony Tuesday night for fostering tolerance and sensitivity on their campuses. Orange County Human Relations presented the teachers with certificates of appreciation. The agency also gave out "Building Bridges" awards to five schools that have done an exceptional job promoting student leadership and developing diversity awareness this year.

The recognized teachers and schools offer student-run clubs to promote tolerance at their schools. Staff at the Orange County Human Relations support the groups with funds and training.

The honored teachers were Janet Marquez at Fountain Valley High School, Karla Jones at Kraemer Middle School in Placentia and Karen Clark at Western High School in Anaheim.

Kraemer Middle School and Western High also won school awards, as did Los Amigos High School in Fountain Valley, Buena Park Junior High School and Cypress High School.

Marquez is the staff adviser for a student group at Fountain Valley High School that does outreach to students who are not connecting with their classmates.

The effort, dubbed "Project Pizza," has students marching up to their peers who eat lunch alone and inviting them for pizza and talk. The club members find out what their fellow students' interests are and then take them to a school club meeting so they can get involved.

"I hear students say, 'This is so cool, I would never have talked to this person,'" Marquez said.

"They're learning to be more responsible and ask, 'How can I make my campus better?'"

JANET MARQUEZ
TEACHER AT FOUNTAIN VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL

quez said. "I see kids with their heads high instead of their heads down."

"(Marquez) is a great adviser. She helps so much and puts so much into the club,"

said Kalen Matson, a junior at Fountain Valley High School who has participated in the club for three years.

Matson was trained as a peer mediator through the group. He sits down with students who have been fighting and has them listen to each other until they resolve their differences.

Matson also attended retreats on diversity sponsored by Orange County Human Relations. "At the first (retreat) we had so many different people from school there. I learned we could all get along."

"I can see their growth," Marquez said. "It's awesome. They're learning to be more responsible and ask, 'How can I make my campus better, be part of the solution instead of part of the problem?'"

If you're going to create change, you want to start with people when they're young, said Dave Southern, event coordinator at Orange County Human Relations. "That's when people's minds are most open to seeing things in a different light."

That's just what Jones is trying to do at Kraemer Middle School in Placentia.

Jones focuses on getting troublemakers to realize they have leadership skills and use them to promote good student relationships.

Jones fostered a dialogue between rival student groups who were making trouble on campus. Just getting students to sit down with each other, she said, "was huge. We got them in a room together to talk about how we all have a right to come to school and be safe."

Clark, who teaches U.S. history at Western High School in Anaheim, advises a student club that gives cultural-diversity presentations in classrooms at the school. Her group has given more than 100 presentations this year, she said. Topics include seeing beyond ethnic labels and taking a stand on intolerance.

"It's spilled outside of the program. They really do change their perspective and become all-inclusive," Clark said.

"Our school is very diverse - we have everything from Middle Eastern to African-American students," said Tiara Din, a sophomore at Western who will lead the club next year.

"It's very nice to be able to interact with everyone on campus."