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A BOND: Rashid Alam, left, who was beaten in Yorba Linda, receives flowers Thursday from Greg and Evelyn Harris, who found a cross burning on their lawn in Anaheim Hills. GLENN KOENIG Los Angeles Times

Anaheim Town Meeting Tries to Heal the Hate

Victims of two recent attacks are among those who gather to affirm their unity.

By DAVID HALDANE
Times Staff Writer

Coming together in the wake of two recent hate crimes in north Orange County, more than 70 residents gathered for a town hall meeting Thursday in Anaheim to reject the motives behind the incidents and affirm their unity.

"The objective of hate is to divide communities," said Rusty Kennedy, executive director of the Orange County Human Relations Commission, which organized "Healing the Hate: Bringing Orange County Together" at the East Anaheim Community Center.

"Our objective here is to show that it won't work — that we will come together as a community and say no to hate."

The meeting was inspired, he said, by the beating in February of a young Muslim man

by a group of teenagers at a Yorba Linda park, and the burning of an 8-foot cross a month later on the Anaheim Hills lawn of an African American man and his Latino wife.

The victims of both incidents were on hand at the meeting to share their stories.

Rashid Alam, 18, said he had wondered as he lay recovering in a hospital bed from the serious injuries inflicted by baseball bats, golf clubs and screwdrivers why America had let him down. But as he read the hundreds of cards and letters that came in, he changed his mind.

"I don't hate the people who did this to me," he said, "because I don't believe in hate. I hope the people who hate will change because I don't want this to happen to anyone anymore."

Greg Harris, the 53-year-old computer systems installer who woke up one morning to the sight of a burning cross, had similar thoughts:

"I would like to get out the message that, yeah, there still is racism, but it's nothing like it

used to be and our community doesn't tolerate it anymore."

That message was stressed repeatedly by a panel that included representatives of education, city government, law enforcement and religion.

High on the agenda, Kennedy said, was an effort to recruit participants into something called "Living Room Dialogues" — a series of neighborhood discussion groups designed by his commission to promote understanding.

"It was an amazing experience," Rabbi Allen Krause of Temple Beth El of South Orange County, said of the series of meetings he helped organize.

"It was a chance to see other people as human beings rather than symbols."

On Thursday night, that spirit seemed to be catching.

"Any sort of education is useful," said Sue Jalabi, 35, a Muslim who recently moved from Oklahoma to Placentia. "I will walk away from here knowing that the new community I live in is trying to make a difference."