

JANUARY 9, 2000

ORANGE COUNTY PERSPECTIVE



Make Diversity an Asset

A week into the year 2000, Orange County reckons with its future. The changing face of the county's population was evident in a bit of celebratory symbolism last weekend. The new year's first births came to immigrant couples from Cambodia and Mexico. The promise of the future rests in part with these parents, their new children, and all citizens who will share this county with them. Making our new ethnic diversity an asset provides both a challenge and an opportunity for the county.

The pace of change from rural and agrarian to suburban and now to partly urban was astonishing in the last half of the 20th century. It used to be that the immigrants to the county came mostly were from somewhere else in the United States, typically Midwesterners lured into the Southern California basin by the region's Rose-Bowl-type weather and cheap rail fares. The tide of those coming from distant places, beginning with the Chinese and Japanese from Asia and the early stream of Mexicans, today has been transformed into an influx from many lands. What gives the past and present its continuity is the search, first in an agrarian land, and today in the Information Age, for a better economic future.

The manner of suburban living that was installed after World War II was fueled by the engines of the military and the industry that grew up to sustain it, bringing in new citizens in search of plentiful jobs, cheap homes and a chance for a fresh start under the brilliant California sun. Today, a center of 2.6 million people has developed a new diversity from the days when the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station opened. It is 59% white, 27% Latino, 12% Asian and about 2% black. The future, suggested by the new arrivals of the past weekend, points to even more changes in the future. By 2020, whites will be a minority.

In recent years, arrivals have found in Orange County a destination for the promise of American life. The parents of the first boy of 2000 had fled Cambodia after Pol Pot came to power, landing in Santa Ana to be near family and friends. The parents of the first girl came from Mexico, with a familiar pattern: the father arriving first, followed by the rest of the family.

For many in Orange County, the choice for

the future will be in how to interact with these new arrivals. Shortsighted pockets of anti-immigrant sentiment have turned up in the county in recent years. The choices are for us: whether to make a commitment to the children of other cultures in education, health care and housing and whether to provide the atmosphere that can build the foundation for a constructive future.

The launching of the new city of Rancho Santa Margarita in South County offered a setting to understand some of these options in a single case study. The decision became obvious last fall when plans for a new Muslim school there ran into local opposition. Some of the concern legitimately was about traffic and congestion, but a willingness to negotiate in good faith could have gone a long way toward resolving such a dispute early on.

County planners were no help; they deferred the proposal to the new city, in effect allowing the unwelcome mat to remain out.

Here is a city that faces a choice in the new year: whether to accept and foster diversity or to pull back the drawbridge. It should set the right tone and do the correct thing by finding a way to make a place for the education of these newest Americans. Here and in other settings around the county, a classic American crossroad probably will reappear. That is, will the impulse for toleration overrule the impulse to exclude those who are unfamiliar?

Rusty Kennedy, the executive director of the Orange County Human Relations Commission, has fielded complaints about several hate calls on the Muslim school proposal, and on a wide range of controversial diversity issues in recent years. He shared his perspective on the changing landscape at a UCI Foundation/Times Orange County forum last year, and he reminded us that the ignorance of a few does not represent the larger community. Orange County stands for something much better.

The new communities, and the old ones reckoning with new citizens, must remember that the opportunity the nation gave them is also for those yet to come. We must realize also that economic prosperity is, not always inclusive.

Orange County's diversity holds the key to its sense of place in the future. What we make of it says much about ourselves.

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