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Attack Recalls City's Hate Crime History

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Aris Gaddvang returned to work Monday at a 99 Cents Only store to expressions of concern from customers and co-workers over the alleged hate-crime attack two days earlier that left him bruised and afraid.

Three teenagers confronted the 25-year-old store manager in the rear parking lot of the Huntington Beach store as he prepared to unload merchandise. They shouted racial slurs and "white power" before beating him with metal pipes, police said.

The attack reverberated across Huntington Beach on Monday—a city that has tried to shed its reputation for hate crimes. Mayor Debbie Cook expressed outrage at the incident and called on schools to do more to educate young people about racial tolerance.

"What kind of commentary is that on our society that we have 14-year-olds acting like white supremacists?" asked Huntington Beach Police Chief Ronald E. Lowenberg. "They learned that from somewhere."

At the store, customers told Gaddvang they were saddened by what happened to him and apologized on behalf of the community. But Gaddvang, a Filipino American, has asked for a transfer out of Huntington Beach.

"I was excited to come here because it is a big, beautiful store in a nice neighborhood," he said. "But now I have to think of my safety."

He said he was particularly frightened by a call he received Saturday evening at the store, a few hours after the attack, from a person Gaddvang said identified himself as a parent of one of his attackers. Gaddvang said the caller used racial slurs and threatened him.

Gaddvang was in the parking lot off Springdale Street about 2:30 p.m. Saturday when the three boys on skateboards taunted him with racial slurs, police said.

"I tried to keep my calm and told them, 'You guys don't know what you're talking about,'" Gaddvang said. But the boys, with metal pipes tucked in their waistbands, refused to leave, he said.

One teen threw a pipe at Gaddvang, and when he ducked he was attacked from behind, he said. Finally, Gaddvang said, he broke away after the boys allegedly threatened to return and kill him.

Police arrested three boys several blocks away. They were taken to Orange County Juvenile Hall on suspicion of felony assault with a deadly weapon, criminal threats and interfering with an individual's civil rights. No charges have been filed.

Gaddvang said the suspects were regular customers. "I'm shocked that kids are doing this." Gaddvang said as he pointed to bruises on his arm, neck and face. "They could have killed me. It's even more frightening if someone is teaching them this."

Gaddvang moved to Orange County from the Philippines six years ago and has worked for the discount store chain ever since.

The attack was the first time he was a target of racial hatred, he said.

"It's never happened to me before. I'm surprised that people hate my race. . . . I didn't even do anything to them," he said. "I've heard of racists, but I never thought those people [would] hate me one day."

Huntington Has Seen a Decline in Hate Crimes

Huntington Beach has been the site of several high-profile hate crimes.

In the mid-1990s, the city received much media attention when skinhead youths shouted racial slurs at an American Indian before stabbing him 27 times. The victim recovered from his wounds; a La Palma teen was convicted of attempted murder in the attack.

City officials responded by creating a task force of police, educators and clergy. They later beefed up racial tolerance education.

Rusty Kennedy, director of the Orange County Human Relations Commission, said the efforts have been successful: Hate crimes both in Huntington Beach and county-wide have declined for several years.

There were 122 hate crimes reported in the county last year, nine in Huntington Beach.

"The whole campaign against hate was a national model of what a city can do to really turn around the image," Kennedy said. "Every community faces this in different ways, but that's a city that did it right."

That makes Saturday's attack all the more vexing to city leaders.

"We were talking about how pleasant it was we weren't referred to as the 'white supremacist gathering place' for some time," Lowenberg said. "I don't think we are back to that point, but we're reminded of the days when we were." Cook said schools must not simply teach about the evils of racism, but must help students learn to coexist with people of different races and backgrounds.

"I sometimes wonder what's going on," the mayor said. "Is it problems that are inherent in the schools that need to be addressed? Are they getting it from their home environment?"

Times staff writer David Haldane contributed to this report.