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The Agency of Social Conscience

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SANTA ANA—It seemed an unlikely decision for the Orange County Board of Supervisors to have made: create a semiautonomous commission, people it with prominent activists then let it loose to document whatever social injustices were occurring in its back yard.

Since its inception in 1971, the Orange County Human Relations Commission has fashioned an impressive list of achievements, tackling issues ranging from hate crimes to worker exploitation, all the while striving to carry out a broad social mandate in a community noted for its social and political conservatism.

Celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, the commission is receiving plaudits from nearly



An occasional close-up look at people and places

every corner of the county. But there are also concerns among some activists that it has lost touch with the communities it is supposed to represent. It has been criticized as acting too timidly on some issues, including the controversial Amber Jefferson and Frankie Martinez cases.

Nonetheless, commission members are proud of their achievements. They believe the commission has acted as a voice

of conscience, and they argue that it has set a moral standard that may have altered Orange County's social path.

"The commission has been a forum; we've provided a power base for the powerless to speak through," said commission Chairwoman Jean Forbath, who has served on the agency for 10 years. "We've also been a pressure reliever and a buffer between the supervisors and many contentious areas."

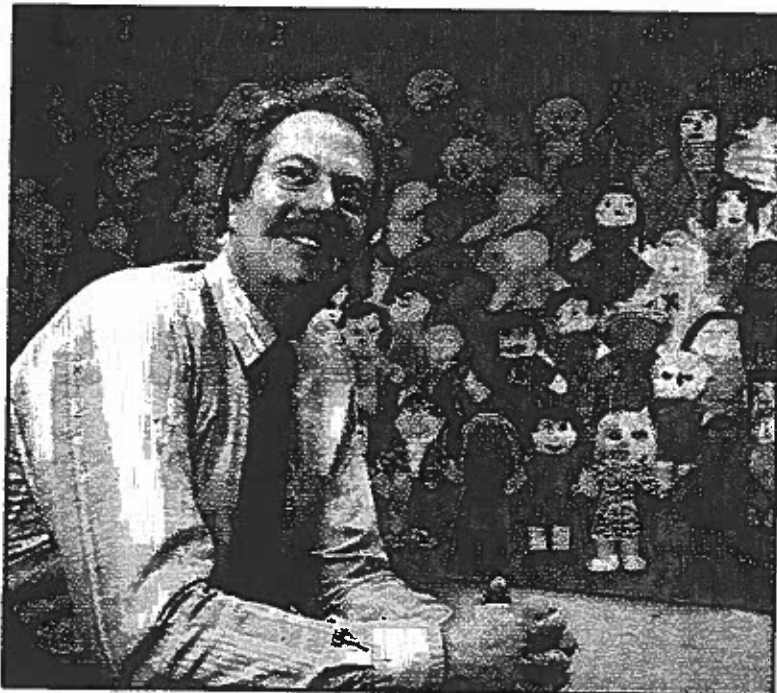
Indeed, the Board of Supervisors in February, 1971, may only have been responding to the writing on the wall when then-Supervisors David L. Baker, Ralph B. Clark, William J. Phillips and Robert Battin—Supervisor Ronald W. Caspers was absent—voted unanimously to form the Human Relations Commission.

"There was a public hearing and many people had a lot to say," said Clark, now 74 and living in Anaheim. "It just seemed like there was a need for a central clearing area for the kinds of problems occurring out there."

In 1969, America's social, political and cultural relations were at full boil, occasionally spilling out in violent clashes that pitted radical against conservative, black against white, generation against generation.

That year in Orange County, Latinos were voicing anger at longstanding policies of housing and hiring discrimination and at the displacement of low-income Mexican-American families in Santa Ana; black residents were leveling charges of police harassment after the fatal shooting of a police officer in southwest Santa Ana.

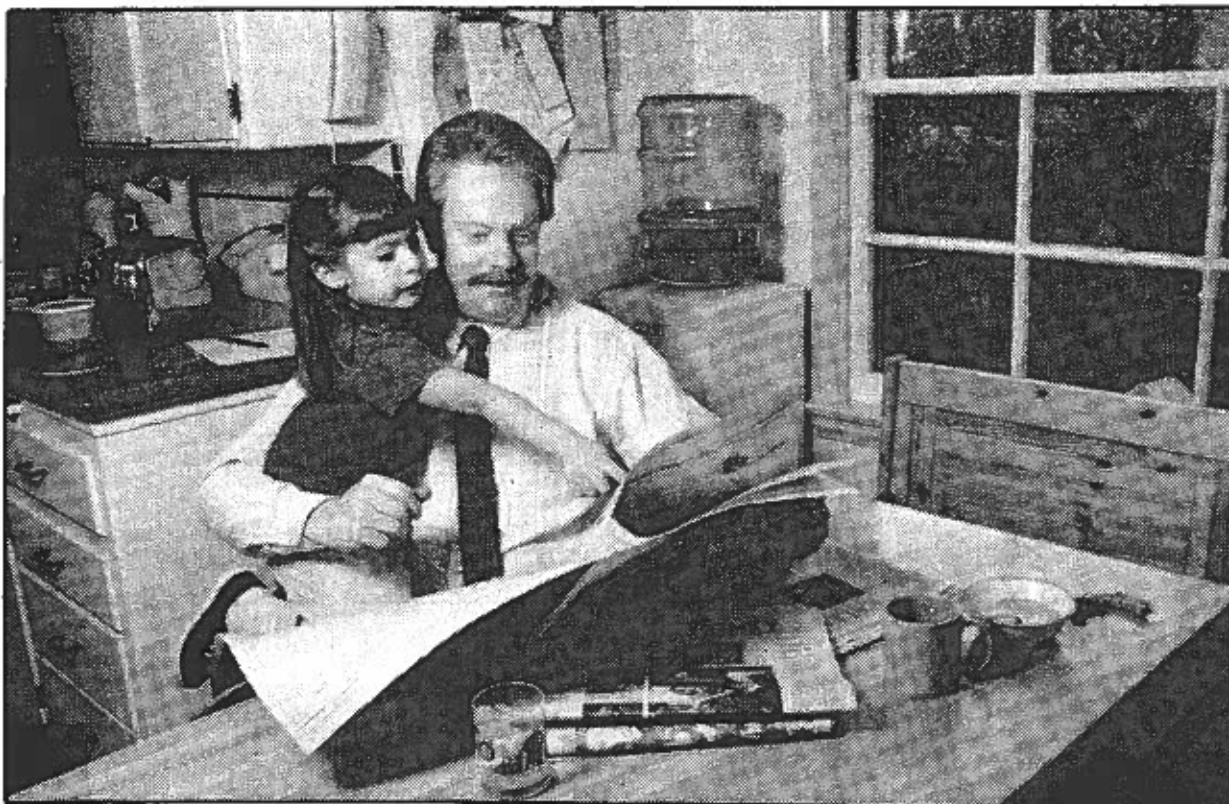
Amid rising tensions, a 1969 county grand jury report supported calls by community activists for the creation of a countywide body that would alleviate conditions of discrimination and forestall the kind of violent protest that had



DON KELSEN / Los Angeles Times

Rusty Kennedy, the executive director of the Orange County Human Relations Commission which is celebrating its 20th year.

COVER STORY



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Kennedy, with his daughter, Ariana, 5, says the Orange County Human Relations Commission has

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racked other communities.

Two years later, the Orange County Human Relations Commission was born. Over the years it would weather charges that its commissioners were no more than militant rabble-rousers, win the support of many of the county's police chiefs who originally had warned that such a commission would become a police review monster and eventually settle into a comfortable and respected position in the county hierarchy.

"We have achieved a level of visibility that acts as a deterrent," said Executive Director Rusty Kennedy, who celebrates 10 years at his post this year. "I think we have helped to establish a community standard by letting people know that some things are not acceptable."

The 11-member panel, appointed

to two-year terms by county supervisors and the Orange County division of the League of California Cities, was given the task of seeking out "causes of tension and conflict, discrimination and intolerance, based on race, religion, national origin, ethnicity, handicap, age, sex, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or marital status and attempt to eliminate those causes."

Recent commission activities have included police training videos to improve relations in the Latino, Vietnamese and disabled communities, and creation of a minority business council, inter-ethnic relations workshops for schoolchildren and an annual harmony festival.

It has also tackled thornier issues, condemning a cross burning in Westminster, death threats

against a Vietnamese newspaper publisher, and the anti-gay quips of a Santa Ana councilman. It prepared a well-received report on worker exploitation in the county, voted to oppose a countywide slow-growth initiative in 1988 and supported low-income housing demonstrations.

The commission has generally won support for its mission. It has a staff of five, a budget of \$293,000 from the county's general fund and raises nearly \$100,000 a year for its projects from other sources.

The commission's annual awards banquet attracts the local movers and shakers, as well the less well-to-do who make up the vanguard of Orange County's brand of grass-roots activism.

Supervisors say they have come to rely on the commission to offer sober evaluation of explosive social

COVER STORY

PANEL: Agency Turns 20

issues.

"Over the years they have reflected the changes in the county and they have been very responsive and very effective," said Supervisor Harriett M. Wieder, who has been on the board since 1978. "They have acted as a support program, served an educational purpose . . . and as a source of authority in addressing many issues. They are much needed, and there will continue to be an even greater need for the commission."

Indeed, despite the commission's success, the level of ethnic tension has not abated much and may be on the increase as the county undergoes sweeping demographic changes due to a continued influx of Latino and Asian immigrants and growing numbers of poor and homeless.

While the '90s will likely prove to be one of the most challenging decades for Orange County, some question whether the commission has lost some of the fire and verve that characterized its youth.

The commission no longer holds its monthly meetings in different communities and instead is anchored in a Santa Ana building owned by the county. While Kennedy and Forbath are often outspoken, other commission members are less vocal, more conservative and tend to come from the ranks of respected community leaders rather than activists.

Many also fault the commission for assuming too low a profile, of fearing to rock the boat, of becoming too willing to defer some issues to police and local authorities.

"I would like to see the commission go back into the community," said Amin David, an Anaheim businessman who served as the commission's third chairman in 1973. "I think a bureaucratic mentality may be setting in. There may be issues that elude the commission because of its methodical and very tactical

sort of manner."

Irma Rodriguez, dean of admissions and records at Fullerton College who served on the commission for more than 14 years—eight as chairwoman—agreed that the agency may not have acted aggressively enough on some issues.

"I think on some issues it needs to assume a higher profile as the conscience of the county," Rodriguez said. "It's a predicament because there are going to be people who are not going to like that. But they must be more aggressive in keeping the Board [of Supervisors] on track and not letting them forget about that under-represented population."

Rodriguez pointed particularly to health care and housing as two areas where the commission has failed to have an impact.

The commission has both housing and health-care committees and has developed patient's rights brochures for AIDS patients as well as assisted the homeless issues task force and sponsored low-income housing workshops.

But Forbath conceded disappointment in those areas.

"Those problems are so horrendous, but we keep slugging away at it," she said. "We do try to keep in mind the people whose interests we represent, but sometimes we are at the mercy of the budget priorities of the county."

Both Forbath and Kennedy also defended the commission for the positions it took on the Amber Jefferson and Frankie Martinez cases.

Jefferson, a 15-year-old Garden Grove cheerleader, was slashed across the face during a brawl among several other teens at a Stanton apartment complex last August. Jefferson, who is part black, charged that she was the victim of a racially motivated hate crime. Trials are pending for a white youth and a black woman in connection with the brawl. Another man pleaded guilty to misdemeanor fighting in public and was fined \$150 and sentenced to three years of probation.

In the Martinez case, the 18-year-old man was fatally shot by a Westminster police officer after a melee that broke out at the Martinez home during a birthday party in July, 1988. The police officer was later exonerated in a federal civil rights suit of using excessive force

and violating Martinez's civil rights.

In both instances, the Human Relations Commission was criticized by the families for not taking up their cause and for not condemning the way police and prosecutors handled the cases.

But Kennedy said the cases were not clear-cut and questioned whether it is proper for the commission to render judgments in such situations.

"In both cases we had to make a determination in a mature, careful way," said Kennedy. "Our judgment was that their rights were going to be protected and that we couldn't go in and do more for them. They would have liked for us to judge, but we can't."

Wieder agreed that the commission is—and should be—limited in its authority.

"I don't think it's a fair criticism of them," she said. "There are lots of organizations out there to take more aggressive action, but it's not their role."

George Williams, executive director of the Orange County Urban League, praised the commission's handling of the Jefferson case.

"The approach they took was prudent," Williams said. "There was quite a bit of emotionalism involved and rightly so, but within the context of the legality of it and who had jurisdiction, I think they did a marvelous job."

But Williams also said the commission may lack the effectiveness that comes with more formal authority and said the Board of Supervisors should consider giving the commission more flexibility to pursue discrimination and civil rights charges.

Back in 1971 when the possibility of a human relations commission was being mulled over, supervisors and activists grappled with the question of authority and whether the commission should be appointed as a police review board or be given subpoena powers along the lines of similar commissions on the East Coast.

Kennedy, for one, thinks the board made the right choice.

"It would be a totally different kind of organization—hung upon technicalities and legalities like the courts," he said. "Instead, we are forced to rely on ingenuity and creativity in getting things done rather than just enforcing laws."