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Workshops offer tools of tolerance

Symposium for middle-school students hammers away at prejudice.

By ERICA PEREZ
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FULLERTON • Twelve-year-old Esther Kim studied the picture of "Bill" — a young man with long, scraggly hair, mustache and beard — and ventured a guess at who he was.

"A dropout?" said Kim, a student at Mesa View Middle School. "I don't know."

"He doesn't shower," said Cecilia Cardenas, a seventh-grader at Brookhurst Junior High.

Cardenas and Kim's group assigned characteristics to kids in four pictures at Friday's 10th annual Walk in My Shoes symposium for middle-school students.

"Are these things we would say to their faces?" student presenter Rosa Hong asked after the middle-schoolers finished.

"Noooo," the students said. "Now," said Hong, a sophomore at University High School. "Let's see who they really are."

"Oh my God," Cardenas said. "Are you serious?"

In walked "Bill" — whose real name is Chris Warner.

"I'm sorry," Cardenas whis-



YGNACIO NANETTI, THE REGISTER

HIP-HOP SHOP: James McCall addresses middle-schoolers at the Hip-Hop Expression workshop Thursday at the 10th annual Walk in My Shoes symposium, held at Cal State Fullerton.

pered.

Nope, Warner said, he wasn't a dropout. The 16-year-old tested out of University High School and now attends Irvine Valley College.

"But yes, I only shower once a week," he said.

Cardenas sighed. "Well, I was right about the shower thing."

The "What Do You See?" workshop was one of 17 events at the symposium.

About 475 students and several teachers, administrators and student leaders from around the county converged on Cal State Fullerton's Titan Student Union for the conference, which aims to help eliminate discrimination and violence in increasingly diverse schools.

Other events, such as the play "Bang Bang You're Dead," addressed school violence.

"Kids can see other students and other campuses and share some of the things that work," said Rusty Kennedy, executive director of the Orange County Human Relations Commission, which organizes the event.

"How do you overcome apathy?" Kennedy added. "How do you get students involved? What are the goals of building a campus climate where diverse people feel safe?"

The first Walk in My Shoes was held when the county was nearly 80 percent white. Last fall, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that ethnic minorities had become the county

majority.

The Human Relations Commission initiated a high-school conference in 1988, adding the middle-school event in 1995. Twenty-five middle schools participate in the program, which brings together administrators and parents, teachers and students to organize retreats, teacher training and a schoolwide project.

Stephine Michrina, a teacher at Lakeside Middle School, said the "What Do You See?" workshop shook up her students in a good way.

"It's a hard concept for them to grasp if you don't bring it into their everyday world," Michrina said. "They were held accountable for their stereotypes."

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