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STREET SMARTS

Hate-crime victims encouraged to talk

Quentin Lee had been openly gay for 14 years and on occasion had heard the derogatory words but had never been beaten up because of his sexual orientation.

That changed Jan. 24 when he ventured from his Los Angeles home to La Palma for a party mostly packed with gay Asians from Orange County. A little past midnight, as the party was wrapping up, he headed toward his car. Another vehicle pulled up.

"Faggots!" someone yelled out of the car window.

Lee blurted out a two-word profanity.

Two men jumped out of the car, ran toward him and pummeled him with their fists. He held out his arms to protect



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his head. Soon after, his attackers drove away.

Suddenly he'd become the victim of a hate crime.

"These things happen in such darkness," said Lee, 33. "For weeks, I felt alone."

He's not the only one.

In 2002, 124 people reported being the victim of a hate crime or a hate incident in Orange County, according to the Orange County Human Relations Commission.

At first, some victims, like Lee, prefer not to talk about what happened. They may feel ashamed or frightened. All, however, have rights and should report the incident to law enforcement, said Heather Banuelos, a program director at the nonprofit group Community Service Programs Inc.

The report could lead to the perpetrator's capture and save someone else from an attack, she said.

Organizations like Banuelos' help persuade reluctant victims to file a police report. An official report is required to qualify for state aid to pay medical and therapy bills and even relocation costs, Banue-

los said.

"Victims have rights in California," she said. "They don't have to sit in silence. We encourage people to come forward."

Hate crimes generally spike when certain groups are spotlighted by the media or government, said Iliana Soto, community-building director for the Human Relations Commission.

In 1998, a marked increase in the victimization of Latinos coincided with the hardening of attitudes toward immigrants - both legal and undocumented, the commission reported.

More recently, in light of the 9-11 terrorist attacks, 69 of the 181 people who reported being the victim of a hate crime in Orange County in 2001 were either Arab or perceived to be from the Middle East.

"Regularly, (the attackers) are people who feel fear, who feel like they're being targeted and feel they have a need to attack back," Soto said.

Lee said he started to blame himself after the attack.

"Suddenly you're a victim and you're completely alone," he said. "And then you wonder if you provoked it."

After several meetings with staff members in Banuelos' office of Victim Assistance Programs, Lee came to realize that he wasn't to blame.

"I'm not sure you can prevent a hate crime, as a victim," he said. "It's being at the wrong place at the wrong time. I feel like if it didn't happen to me, it would've happened to someone else."

For help, contact:

- Orange County Human Relations Commission, (714) 567-7470
- Victim Assistance Programs, (949) 975-0244