

# THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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## Building BRIDGES over teen apathy

On an overcast afternoon, I walk onto the Anaheim campus of Western High School, a place that looks like your average, ordinary American high school.

The flag team is practicing twirls, groups of students are



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huddled throughout the main quad, and others are hurrying home with loaded backpacks. But I'm there to meet four teens who are anything but average or ordinary. They're part of the campus group called Pioneer Outreach Network for Diversity (POND), which was created as part of the Orange County Human Relations Commission's BRIDGES program.

The four students include POND president Eduardo Garcia, an 18-year-old senior who recalls a time not long ago in junior high when he was a kid who was "made fun of."

He admits that he hated junior high, a feeling that a lot of kids can probably relate to. Why hated? He puts it diplomatically: "In junior high I noticed that among the kids there was a lack of openness to respect other people on various levels. Race was an issue."

More bluntly put, students called him names like "dirty Mexican." The first time it happened, he says he was caught off guard.

"I didn't know how to respond. That was the first time I'd ever been called something so hurtful," says Garcia, of Mexican and Peruvian descent.

It's something he never forgot, but rather than ignore it, it inspired him to join POND his sophomore year. Too often, we make the mistake of ignoring problems like this, he says.

"The reason why it was such an issue is because no one cared and no one talked about it," says Garcia.

So talking about "it" is exactly what Garcia and his classmates Tiara Din, Hieu Nguyen, and Natalie Ramirez are working on thanks to BRIDGES, which trains them to give classroom presentations on issues like homophobia, gender inequality and sexual harassment.

"You have to do the presentations to get people to think about it and then care. It's a slow process," says Nguyen.

Alcoholism, stereotypes and apathy are some of the most pressing issues these teens say are facing youth today, but they think that getting past the apathy is one of their greatest challenges.

"I realized that in order for people to care they have to be exposed to situations that are abrasive," says Nguyen, 17. "Then you can start trying to change things, instead of excusing them: 'Oh they don't care therefore they'll never care.'"

BRIDGES has been around 18 years. Originally a crisis-intervention program created in response to a racial incident at

El Modena High School in Orange, it has evolved into a voluntary program to improve intergroup relations on school campuses.

Students are trained to use positive peer support to create a school climate that respects society's diversity.

Four years ago, the Orange County Relations Commission was operating BRIDGES on 50 campuses across Orange County. Today, because of financial setbacks, the program is on only 25 campuses.

"The need is immense, and that's why our limiting factor is resources, essentially," says Rusty Kennedy, executive director of the commission.

The county provided the commission with \$290,000 in funding this year, but it's actually the commission's nonprofit that raises funds and pays for BRIDGES. Throughout the last four years, Kennedy says foundations and individuals pulled back on donations, businesses experienced a downturn, and cities dealt with fiscal crises - all of which contributed to a drop in the nonprofit budget, from \$3 million a few years ago to \$1.5 million today.

For a county of 3 million people, that's a paltry 50 cents spent per person to build understanding, to resolve conflicts and to teach people how to live among those with different beliefs.

"The change in population has been huge and difficult," says Kennedy. "You

see it when difficult times come like Sept. 11 or the Little Saigon demonstrations or particularly heinous hate crimes. You see these traumatic incidents that occur and it's really then that you look and say how much work have we done in the arena of human relations?"

The answer to that question is not enough.

It may sound hokey to say that we need to be taught how to relate to each other as humans, but history has shown us clearly that too often we resort to violence to deal with differences.

When I ask them what would happen if BRIDGES didn't exist at Western High School, Garcia responds: "I feel like there would be no hope; there would be no place for kids to go," he says.

He points to his own participation in POND and how it's helped him deal with the anger and pain he's felt because of racism.

"I feel that I've been able to deal with that through this program, and I know a lot of kids are able to do that when they are participating in the presentations," says Garcia.

"And if we didn't have that, where would they get it?"

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