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Youth, adults cross line to new awareness

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Social issues • Program challenges participants to set aside intolerance.

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NEWPORT BEACH

It was just a strip of white tape. Straight down the middle of a caramel-colored floor.

But when program leader Donna Stevens asked the 85 adult and teen participants at Youth Challenge Day to cross the white line on Saturday, the tape felt more like a Berlin Wall. With each step they took across the room to be divided by race, gender, religion, culture and life experiences, each person learned how barriers of prejudice and intolerance are built.

Their challenge was to tear those barriers down.

The event was sponsored by the county's Human Relations Commission and the Newport Beach Youth Council as part of an international program to stop teen violence and alienation.

"Cross the line if you are Hispanic," Stevens said. "You and across from you."

A dozen people shuffled across the white tape. A girl's sobs sliced through the heavy silence. She was one of many who would shed tears at memories of rejection and hate by others. A friend walked over to hug her.

Whites stepped away from people of color, geeks from hipsters, fat from thin, young from old, men from women, Christians from Muslims, rich from poor, and so on.

Josh Ludmir, 18, of Newport Beach came to champion "zero tolerance" against bullying. Ludmir found himself more enlightened, tasting what it was to be on the other side of the tracks after stepping across the white line several times.

Long before Saturday, Brent and Breanne Ogden, both 13, knew the power of cruel words and actions.

"Last year was extremely difficult for them," said their mom, Katie, 45, of Newport Beach. Brent felt hopeless and believed his life worthless, she said.

Breanne said she felt stuck between wanting to fit in and sticking up for her twin.

Katie said she felt helpless when school officials dismissed her concerns, telling her, "Boys will be boys."

The family found they were hardly alone.

Throughout the day, kids and adults unburdened their feelings - worry, anger and pain. They learned to listen and empathize.

As the day progressed, arms that had crossed against chests earlier opened wide to hug. Skeptical expressions changed to compassionate looks and smiles.

The last exercise was to write messages of affirmation on white sheets taped on everyone's back. Scribbled on Brent: "awesome kid," "very cool!" and "beautiful smile."

"This is the best thing that's ever happened to me," he said.

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