

THE ORANGE COUNTY  
**Register**

# Lessons about racism and survival

Thursday, May 24, 2001

**Education • Anaheim high schools to teach the Vietnamese-American experience.**

BY HIEU TRAN PHAN  
The Orange County Register

As a child, Michael Matsuda knew firsthand the pain of racism. Now the high school teacher is helping launch a program he hopes will educate and inspire others to oppose prejudice.

Matsuda this week began training 27 teachers in what is believed to be the nation's first high school program to deal with the Vietnamese-American experience.

For him, the historic launch in the Anaheim Union High School District marks a personal victory. Growing up during the Vietnam War, Matsuda was taunted because he is Asian-American. People called him "the enemy." Decades earlier, his Japanese parents were sent to U.S. internment camps at the height of World War II. He didn't hear any school discussion of these issues until college.

"As a parent of a half-Vietnamese 3-year-old, I don't want my child to have to experience the same things I went through," said the head of the curriculum committee. "I strongly believe that teachers must become more aware of communities from which their students are coming."

Members on the Orange County Asian Pacific Community Alliance (OCAPICA) developed the program titled "Vietnamese-Americans: Lessons in American History." They received funding from the county's Human Relations Commission. The 27 teachers will weave the curriculum into their history, civics, language-arts, math, science and social studies classes starting this fall. Eventually, all of Anaheim's 32,000 students will be involved.

They will study such things as the "boat refugee" exodus from Vietnam, torture and imprisonment of South Vietnamese veterans, immigration and assimilation into American culture, and the identity crises that many Vietnamese-American youths confront.

Matsuda and other committee officials noted the importance of establishing this curriculum in Orange County, home to the largest concentration of Vietnamese outside their homeland. Even with Little Saigon's influence, some fear Vietnamese youngsters are losing their heritage without formal education about their roots.

Huy Tran, a world history teacher and curriculum contributor, said few of his students understand the significance of April 30, 1975, when the Vietnam War ended.

"Fewer yet would know about boat people or when Minh Ly, the victim of a hate crime in Tustin," he said. "It bothers me that so many of our young folks are forgetting about the struggles of their community, the elderly, the disabled, the poor, as well as those in Vietnam."

But ultimately, the curriculum should relate to students from every walk of life, said Mary Anne Foo, executive director of the alliance. She finds parallels among all immigrant groups that have made their way to America, from the first Pilgrims to East Europeans to Asians to Africans.

"Our area is becoming more and more diverse," Foo said. "A more inclusive education will help prevent discrimination and racial violence. It is key to promoting acceptance."

For information on the program, call OCAPICA at (714) 636-9095.

• Contact Hieu Tran Phan at (714) 796-7811 or [hphan@notes.freedom.com](mailto:hphan@notes.freedom.com).