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Portrait of Diversity

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The smell of fresh paint mixed with the afternoon heat as Morika Stewart, 14, placed the final touches of bright green on a figure representing her silhouette. As she skillfully dabbed paint around images of her family and friends that filled the center of her picture, Morika, a student at Orange County High School of the Arts, explained the significance of her piece.

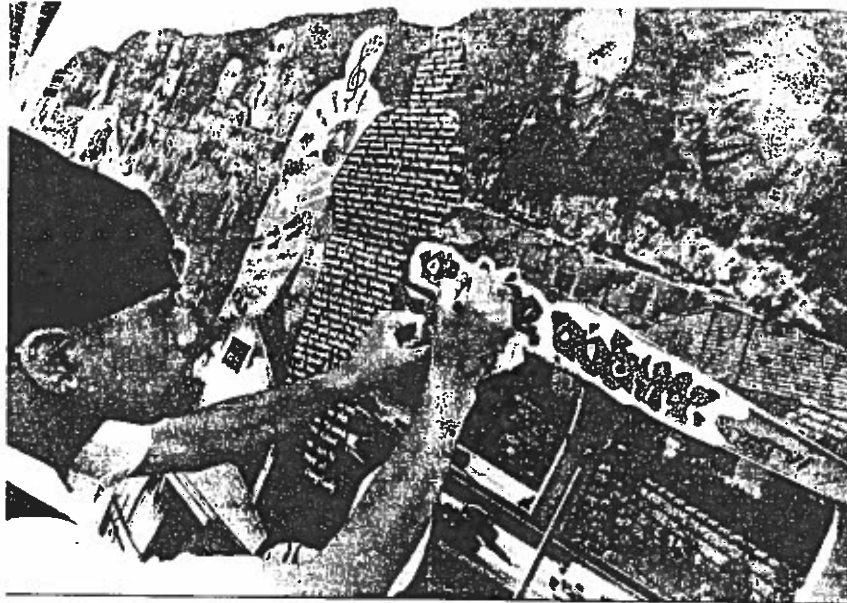
"I chose to tell my family's story and to represent that the youth of Orange County have opinions and thoughts," she said as she stepped back to get a better view of the whole canvas. "We do have a voice and different ideas."

Morika and 21 other students from Orange and Los Angeles counties celebrated the end of a first-of-its-kind arts project Friday by unveiling a mural they designed and created at the Santa Ana Grand Central Arts Center.

The unveiling rounded out a weeklong program called Summer Art Camp for Social Awareness.

The program, sponsored by the Orange County Human Relations Commission and funded by sports agent Leigh Steinberg, brought together nearly two dozen teenagers from divergent cultural and economic backgrounds. The goal, organizers said, was to teach group and leadership skills by tapping into the students' artistic talent.

The mural, titled "Under the Peel"—painted on canvas and created with a mix of digital imaging and acrylic paints—displays the growth of Orange County and features local civil rights figures who have contributed to its diversity.



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Oscar Maldonado of Orange finishes his portion of the mural honoring civil rights activists that he and others created as part of a weeklong Summer Art Camp for Social Awareness.

"I'm so excited and so proud of the children," said Barbara Laurence-Hill, the first African American teacher in Orange County and one of the speakers at Friday's presentation. "Those young minds are so bright and so optimistic, and it shows in the work they have done."

Hill, whose face is included in the mural, said that watching the multicultural group working on the project gave her a sense of hope for the growing diversity in Orange County—a contrast from the time she began her career in Santa Ana 40 years ago.

"My first teaching experience was very traumatic... It was a long, hard road," Hill said, recalling racial and gender discrimination she encountered during her years working for the Santa Ana Unified School District.

But Hill said she refused to let death threats, several break-ins at her Santa Ana home and tampering with her own children's school records drive her away from her profession and ideals.

"I decided to stay because of my strong belief in justice," she said. "I wanted to preserve the freedom to pursue what I believe is right... and to do it with the dignity with which I taught and carried myself all those years."

Students in the arts program heard Hill's story and those of other Orange County civil rights activists, including Ralph and Natalie Kennedy, who championed the issue of fair housing in the county.

A picture of Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez, the couple who brought the first school desegregation case in the U.S., also appears in the mural. Each

activist's face is digitally imaged against the backdrop of the Santa Ana Mountains.

"They are a part of history, like the mountains that always look down upon us," said Cary Nelson, 16, of Newport Beach.

The students' mural also includes such Orange County hallmarks as agricultural fields, housing developments, freeways and beaches.

As they received their certificates for completing the course before family, friends, mentors and city officials, students explained why they chose to create the artwork they did and the symbolism behind it.

For Edgar Benitez, 15, of Santa Ana the medium was graffiti. "It's not bad, and it's not only what people think," he said. "It's also another form of art."

Students felt that their participation in the mural, which will be displayed throughout Orange County, has provided them with a voice and a lesson in history.

"We are trying to show what's under... what's not being said about Orange County," Cary said.