

Brutal Attack Spurs Worries of Racial Backlash

OC Human Relations urges whites and Hispanics to unite against violence after a brawl that left a San Clemente man in a coma.

• By Adam Townsend



Avenida Rosa and Avenida Victoria

Amid rumblings of possible racial overtones to a Jan. 6 street brawl that left two men injured and one in a coma, a county group is urging calm and unity.

"This is not a brown-white issue," said Rusty Kennedy, executive director of OC Human Relations, which works to prevent racial violence and foster ethnic understanding and tolerance. "It's an issue of violent gangsters."

Three Hispanic men -- including two allegedly affiliated with the Varrio Chico criminal gang in San Clemente -- have been charged with attempted murder and assault for allegedly beating three white men, one of whom was fighting for his life late Tuesday after being bashed in the head with a brick.

The motives behind the attack remain unclear, but racially charged rumblings in some parts of the white community have already begun in comments posted on Patch and other media outlets. Some in the city's Hispanic community--many of whom are proud of their civic involvement and efforts to stop gang crime over the last few years--fear a possible backlash.

OC Human Relations is a nonprofit that works closely with community groups and the Orange County Sheriff's Department to defuse tensions among the county's varied ethnic groups. It has a strong presence in San Clemente, largely through grant money from the Mission Hospital system.

Rose Velasquez--no relation to the Gilberto Velazquez accused in the crime--is a community organizer for OC Human Relations. She runs a youth group and other civic programs in the largely Hispanic Las Palmas neighborhood where she also lives.

"I spoke with a group of youth that I work with [about the crime]," she said. "They said other kids were going to tease them and hold them responsible. These are seventh-graders. I told them, 'You just do your best, you work hard and make the right choices.' "Our whole plan is to have these kids get along with the Caucasian kids, and for them not to be racist either--like, 'Oh, those white kids...' We want to integrate the Hispanic community."

A History of Gangs

More than four years ago, the D.A.'s office persuaded a judge to impose gang injunctions over large swaths of central San Clemente and San Juan Capistrano. The legal designation means gang

members identified on a Sheriff's Department list face curfews and restrictions on clothing, association with others on the list and other rules.

Velasquez said many of San Clemente's Hispanic residents welcomed the injunction, although there was some backlash in San Juan Capistrano. "When we did one-on-one interviews with [Las Palmas] parents three years ago--started knocking on doors--the No. 1 concern was 'How do I help my child so they don't become involved with gangs,' " Velasquez said.

Thanks to the injunction, combined with work by the sheriff's Gang Reduction and Intervention Program, OC Human Relations and the city of San Clemente, gang-related crime in town has drastically dropped over the past three years, officials said. The idea behind all these organizations working together is to provide a community that faces language and socioeconomic barriers with tools to help get rid of crime in their area. The consensus among law enforcement professionals is that in neighborhoods with gang problems, it's often a small minority of criminals who end up terrorizing the majority of law-abiding residents.

Still Simmering

Despite the injunction, community meetings with law enforcement, community councils, youth groups, tutoring and extracurricular activities, the gang problem in San Clemente never went completely underground. Just last year, as outlined in a successful grant application for extra policing that began in June at San Clemente bars, nuisance crimes involving Varrio Chico and a local white power gang have continued.

"Members of the Varrio Chico San Clemente (VCSC) street gang, San Clemente Boys (SCB), a group loosely affiliated with white pride groups, a large population of narcotics users and a large population of subjects on active probation and parole frequent The Triangle [downtown bar district]," the grant application states. "These bars attract the sales of narcotics, which primarily consist of heroin and methamphetamine. Narcotics sales cause altercations between VCSC and SCB gang members."

Stopping the Cycle

The trick to stamping out these problems is to offer other options to children when they're young--before high school, Velasquez said.

When OC Human relations received its first grant to work in San Clemente, organizers tried to start youth groups in San Clemente High School. They found limited success there. But once Velasquez started working with seventh-graders at Shorecliffs Middle School, her youth group members brought up their grades and started extracurricular activities.

The Capistrano Unified School District, church groups and local businesses have also helped to make a concerted effort to stamp out kids' desire to join gangs.

Those who allegedly perpetrated the Jan. 6 attack ranged in age from 23 to 29--and two already have violent criminal backgrounds--are beyond the reach of schools or most community groups.

"They're full-grown men," Velasquez said. "You can't help everyone...[but] the kids don't want to be involved in this. They're actually taking the opportunities."