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Middle-schoolers learn respect at CSUF



by Lou Ponsi

FULLERTON Seventh-grader Michael Araiza, on Friday, learned that outside appearances aren't necessarily indicative of a person's character. Michael, a student at Sycamore Junior High School in Anaheim, was also reminded that individuals make interpretations of others based on a variety of preconceived beliefs. The 12-year old was among 530 students from 21 Orange County middle schools who participated in the 16th Annual "Walk In My Shoes" conference at Cal State University Fullerton.

Hosted by OC Human Relations, a non-profit whose mission is to eliminate prejudice, intolerance and discrimination, the conference featured a series of hands-on workshops for students. The youngsters learned acceptance and respect and were encouraged to take the lessons back to their schools to initiate change. The workshops addressed a variety of issues, from cyber bullying to mental illness to stereotyping.

"It makes me think not to judge a person by what they look like but to get to know them," Michael said, after taking a workshop titled "Melting Pot and Happy Dots!"

In the workshop, students worked in groups to create an alien out of toothpicks and marshmallows, guided only by their own idea of what an alien might look like.

Students from Rancho Starbuck Intermediate School in Whittier were moved by a play titled "Bang Bang, You're Dead." Performed by the Trabuco Hills High School students, the play was the story of an overwhelmed student who was the object of taunting, gossip and peer pressure. Pushed to the brink, the student shoots his classmates. "A lot of that stuff really goes on," said Rancho Starbuck student Austin Brown, referring to the teasing and gossip that takes place among youngsters.

"Underneath It All" was a girls-only workshop focusing on methods used by the media to define beauty. Students in that class had the chance to present their own ideas on beauty.

Many of the students at the conference were in the BRIDGES program in their respective schools, said Barbara Hunt, OC Human Relations Development Director. BRIDGES students focus on reducing bullying and prejudice while fostering unity at schools throughout Orange County.

Woodbridge High senior Youval Yadlin has volunteered with "Walk In My Shoes" since eighth grade and can see the changes in the students by the end of the sessions.

"They are energized and ready to go back to their schools and find things to change," she said.

Students came from such cities as Anaheim, Garden Grove, Huntington Beach, Irvine, La Habra, La Palma, Orange, Placentia, Rancho Santa Margarita, Santa Ana, Tustin and Westminster.