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Defusing Student Tension Before It Starts

■ **Education:** Daylong symposium uses workshops to guide middle-schoolers toward tolerance of cultural diversity.

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IRVINE—Teasing ^{2/19/98} among friends and classmates is typical on any middle school campus. But if the chatter degenerates into name-calling or stereotyping, it can lead to serious problems in high school and beyond, say organizers of a conference today at UC Irvine.

The third annual "Walk in My Shoes" symposium, hosted by the Orange County Human Relations Commission, will target an emotionally vulnerable age group, said Rusty Kennedy, executive director.

"They're becoming adults, establishing identities," he said. "At this age, issues of self-esteem and negative stereotypes can color the way we look at ourselves. Name-

calling because of religion or ethnicity or body size can be very harmful when you talk about hate crime in later years."

More than 300 students ages 12 to 15, teachers and administrators from across Orange County are expected at the daylong session. "Walk in My Shoes" will feature workshops, panels and games aimed at developing an appreciation for cultural diversity and easing tensions among students of different backgrounds. This year, organizers will introduce a video titled "What Do You See?" along with a poster campaign to be used across county campuses.

The ethnic shifts in Orange County's population have given rise to more cultural conflicts in school, said Mike Matsuda, a teacher at Orangeview Junior High in Anaheim who attends the symposium each year.

"The issues of misunderstanding are heightening as populations change dramatically. In a short time our school . . . has gone from pretty white to now having 35 different ethnicities," Matsuda

said.

"This program has had a tremendous effect on exposing students to issues that impact their lives. It gives them a working vocabulary on dealing with racial and social issues. Before they come here, a lot of kids don't even know what 'stereotype' means," he added.

"Often, the first time kids start to interact with kids that are different is in middle school," said Bob Haskell, president of the Pacific Life Foundation, the charitable arm of Pacific Life Insurance Co. and a sponsor of the symposium. "They are at an age where they are impressionable and sometimes form cliques."

The event uses workshops with titles such as "Flash Judgments," "Taking a Closer Look (Views of the Disabled)" and "Express Yourself Through Art" to engage students.

"The hardest way to teach a kid about diversity is to talk about it or lecture about it," Haskell said. "The easiest way is to provide experience."