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Focused on equality: Davis group helps teens promote racial tolerance among peers

By Pamela Martineau -- Bee Staff Writer

The film opens with the cheery theme song from "Leave It to Beaver," then pans to images of June Cleaver waving to her happy young boys from the doorway of her gleaming suburban home.

It ends with graphic images of African Americans being beaten during civil rights marches in the South.

Interspersed between the two depictions of America in the 1960s is the tale of the city of Davis as told by students at Davis Senior High School. It's the story of friendly farmers markets and silly toad tunnels. But it's also a story of racist taunting and violence - an undercurrent of racism that belies the community's liberal reputation.

"You're not supposed to see racism here," said Tanvir Kapoor, a junior at Davis Senior High. Kapoor and 28 of his fellow students are bringing that undercurrent of racism into the public eye. Besides the film he and some of his classmates created, the youths are researching racial disparities on their campus and leading discussions about racism and tolerance among their peers.

Many schools throughout the region and nation have made teaching tolerance a priority, especially since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, sparked backlashes against some minority groups. But what is different about the Davis discussions is that they are being led and organized by the students themselves. The forums on racism often feature student-led research that outlines racial disparities on campus.

"Teenagers never like listening to an adult," said Maryam Dolatshahi. She is a member of Youth in Focus, the group of students facilitating discussions about race in Davis. "And teenagers have such a profound ability to influence each other."

Youth in Focus formed in Davis after a disturbing string of racist incidents occurred in town involving young people. The events reached a critical point in February 2003 with the arrest of two teens for spraying a racial epithet in the street near an African American family's home. Other incidents included

racist slurs shouted at sporting events and off-campus fights that were racially motivated.

The incidents grabbed newspaper and TV news headlines and sparked a series of community meetings where Davis youths of color spoke of racist taunting and harassment. After the community forums ended, Jann Murray-Garcia, a local pediatrician and head of Blacks for Effective Community Action, saw a need to keep the dialogue going. She began meeting with Davis youths at the high school to talk about race.

What grew out of those forums was the local chapter of Youth in Focus, a program designed to teach youths how to define and develop solutions to problems in their communities. With the help of counselors and administrators at Davis Senior High, Murray-Garcia assembled a group of 29 ethnically, racially and religiously diverse students at the school. The students, known now as the YIF scholars, set out to learn about race and racism - how to talk about it, frame it, study it.

Retreats were held. Students studied the stages of racial and ethnic identity development. They learned not to blame others. They learned that all people carry some forms of prejudice with them. The YIF scholars have used their newly minted skills to bring to light the problems of racism on their campus. Now they're looking at ways to solve those problems.

Murray-Garcia says she can already see things changing. In the fiercely academically competitive town where students achieve some of the highest test scores in the state, more and more students are starting to get an important message about striving for excellence, she said. "They know there is no excellence unless all of us are given the opportunity to be excellent," she said.

At 7 p.m. on a recent school night, about 30 Davis Senior High students are hanging around in a classroom at the school, eating pizza and waiting for a film to start. They are gathered to see the film described in fliers as depicting "the face of hate in Davis." Written, directed and produced by students Kapoor, Rodrigo Ojeda-Beck and Paul Donahue, the film has created a buzz on campus. Posters advertising the debut hang throughout the school.

Kapoor walks to the front of the room and writes some words and phrases on the chalkboard. He lays down guidelines for the discussion to follow the film. "Confidentiality. Use 'I' statements and not 'they' statements. Be nice. Agree to disagree." "Every time we show this video, there are a lot of strong reactions that come out. People feel guilty. They feel angry. That's OK. That's normal," Kapoor tells the students.

The room is quiet as the film airs. In it, an African American student, a Davis Senior High graduate, breaks down crying, telling about the time he lost his temper after being repeatedly called the "N" word by a fellow classmate. He

was suspended. The classmate was not.

The former student describes how it felt to have the word hurled at him for the first time. "My image of a perfect world was broken in first grade," the young man says in the film. After the movie, the lights are turned on and the room is still quiet. Adults who are not part of the group are asked to leave. The discussion is private and exists for one reason only: to give kids a venue to talk about racism.

These discussions have been occurring more frequently at Davis Senior High - in English classes, in drama classes, at lunch tables on campus. Kids say they feel they can talk about race and racism. They feel it's important.

Even a recent campus play - student-written and called "Remember Tomorrow" - dealt with the issues of bigotry, prejudice and exclusion.

"I think people are now more willing to talk about racial issues," said Donahue, a Youth in Focus member who worked on the film. "That was one of our big goals ... to get the dialogue going." Part of getting that dialogue started was presenting students with data about racial disparities on campus. That's where the research component of the Youth in Focus program came in. The YIF scholars polled and prodded their fellow students in surveys and focus groups. They studied more than five years of district data on the academic achievement of various ethnic groups.

What they learned was that racism moves beyond slurs, taunts and violence. It is also a quiet undercurrent that exists in lower expectations for some students. And they also learned that when talking about a social problem, it's important to have facts to state your case. "They couldn't just say - 'That's a lie. You're making that up' - because we had grounds to stand on," Donahue said.

The students issued their report on racial inequities at Davis Senior High to a packed auditorium on May 17, 2004 - the 50th anniversary of the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that declared racial segregation in public schools illegal. An updated report on racial disparities will be presented again May 17.

In the year since, the group has presented its findings at more than 30 different venues, including hearings in the Legislature, parent and teacher gatherings and meetings at the University of California, Davis, and California State University, Sacramento.

In March, YIF members went to the annual National Youth at Risk Conference at Georgia Southern University. They've been invited to present their data at a conference on diversity in Beijing in June. The group is seeking donations to help pay for the trip.

With the help of administrators and teachers, YIF members are developing a curriculum for a class on racism at the high school. They also want to hold more forums on racism and press the district to hire a more diverse faculty.

When another string of racist graffiti occurred at Davis schools in February, some students were initially depressed. They thought their efforts had failed. Then they got angry. They staged a student walkout and rally. They continued their work.

"I felt pretty discouraged, but I also felt empowered, like we had so much more work to do," said Vince Shelton, a junior and YIF member.

That's the sentiment in the last line of the YIF film about racism in Davis:

"We need a solution. What are we going to do about it?"

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Photo Captions:

Violinist Jane Cho basks in applause after performing at a meeting of Davis Senior High's Youth in Focus. "Teenagers never like listening to an adult," says one member of the anti-racism group. "And teenagers have such a profound ability to influence each other." *Sacramento Bee/Carl Costas*

Davis Senior High School Youth in Focus scholars, from left, Rodrigo Ojeda-Beck, Tanvir Kapoor and Paul Donahue discuss the making of a documentary film on racial attitudes in their hometown. The trio produced the movie as a Youth in Focus project. *Sacramento Bee/Carl Costas*

Pediatrician Jann Murray-Garcia, a founder of the Davis chapter of Youth in Focus, discusses the group's progress. Murray-Garcia says she already sees the teens' positive impact in Davis. *Sacramento Bee/Carl Costas*

Burbank High group inspired by Davis

By Pamela Martineau -- Bee Staff Writer

The students in the portable classroom at Luther Burbank High School scan huge sheets of butcher paper taped to the chalkboard. The papers list questions from the hundreds of surveys the youths have distributed on campus over the past weeks.

"Who makes you feel welcome at school?" reads one question. "What makes you want to go to school?" another reads.

The Burbank students surveyed their peers - asking them about their comfort level with teachers, other students and administrators - as a part of a research project facilitated through the program: a collaboration between Youth In Focus, Linking Education and Economic Development (LEED) and the Freedom Bound Center.

Like their peers at Davis Senior High School, Luther Burbank students are taking a lead role in detailing problems on their campus, then working to develop plans to change them.

The students are assembling data from their surveys. They want to learn whether poor relations with teachers and staff can lead to a lack of participation by students.

Jesse Shaver, 17, a Youth in Focus member at Burbank, says it's important that students learn how to tackle problems on their campuses "because we are the ones who are affected by them."

Youth action on youth problems is the mantra of Youth in Focus. The program was started in Nepal and India in 1989 by three Americans fresh out of college who wanted to help youths communicate better and to foster political and historical awareness. It moved to California in the 1990s, morphing in the Bay Area into a varied assortment of programs intended to teach youths institutional and community development.

In 2000, the program latched onto the name Youth in Focus. It has spawned student-led projects throughout Northern California ever since and has offices in Davis and Oakland.

"Youth in Focus seeks to bring young people into the center of decision-making about the institutions and community issues that shape their lives," said Jonathan London, executive director and co-

founder of YIF.

"Our view is that young people are usually at the margins, not the center, if they are being considered at all," he said. "We believe that young people need to be full partners in the decisions about young people."

Through collaborative work, youths learn leadership, organizational, research and communication skills. They learn language that is not divisive and how to interact with adults in a positive manner.

In Anderson, in Shasta County, YIF members are researching why students leave the mainstream high school. Stockton teens are researching whether there are enough services in Stockton for youths to become self-sufficient adults.

Youth in Focus staff have developed a workbook that outlines, step by step, how to start a student-led research program and move through the phases of research and action plans.

One or more adults usually work with the YIF groups, along with a project manager from the Oakland or Davis YIF office. The nonprofit is funded through private donations and grants from foundations such as the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Walter S. Johnson Foundation, Surdna Foundation, Cricket Island Foundation, San Francisco Foundation, Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund and the Walter and Elise Haas Fund.

The Luther Burbank scholars met with Davis YIF members earlier this year to talk about the Davis project. The Burbank students were impressed with the depth and the breadth of the Davis study and with the fact that the Davis students have stuck with their project for more than a year and a half now.

"They didn't give up," Shaver said. "By their continuing to do what they're doing, it created change on campus."

For more information on YIF, go to www.youthinfocus.net.

For more information on Freedom Bound Center, go to www.freedomboundcenter.org

For more information on LEED, go to www.lead.org

Student-produced film shows idyllic town's dark side

By Pamela Martineau -- Bee Staff Writer

They wanted to reach people besides those who typically attend campus or city meetings.

"We had this idea of making a film to reach people across the board, not just a certain group of people," said Rodrigo Ojeda-Beck, who with students Tanvir Kapoor and Paul Donahue recently completed a film described in fliers as showing the "face of hate in Davis."

The three Davis Senior High School students joined forces last summer to piece together a portrait of what they called their "Leave It to Beaver" town.

The film, which remains untitled, juxtaposes images of happy suburbia with dark portrayals of racism.

"In a lot of ways Davis is viewed as a "Leave It to Beaver" town ... like the town is perfect," Ojeda-Beck said.

"Davis is a great town, but even in a great town you still have those dark secrets you don't want to see."

To assemble the film, the youths spent hours poring over footage of Davis community meetings where racism was discussed. They collected articles on racism and masterfully wove the headlines into the film's text. They shot film of students in classrooms. They cut and re-edited and scoured online archives for footage of civil rights marches and footage of stories on Davis from the Comedy Central cable channel.

At the end of February, they completed a version of the film they felt was ready to air. About a day later, another act of racist vandalism occurred in Davis that captured headlines. "Right when we finished this thing, that happened," Ojeda-Beck said. "It was really ironic."

Reaction to the film has been strong and positive. Students who normally don't come out to discussions or events focusing on community issues are coming to see this film during airings on campus, Ojeda-Beck said.

"This wasn't just preaching to the choir," he said. "This was preaching to Davis High."