

# A Hart-felt commitment to racial peace

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Carlos Chavez / Los Angeles Times

Student Michael Zachery and instructor Rick McElwain inspect the "peace pole," newly erected on the Hart High School campus to celebrate cultural diversity. The five-sided pole reads "May Peace Prevail on Earth" in 10 languages.

## **The Newhall high school where ethnic tensions erupted last year erects a monument to cultural diversity.**

By Ann M. Simmons, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer  
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Determined that their school not be branded as racially intolerant, students and faculty at Newhall's Hart High School dedicated a symbolic "peace pole" Tuesday aimed at affirming their respect for cultural diversity and their commitment to ethnic harmony.

The dedication of the 10-foot copper monument comes more than a year after a racially charged clash among students on the north Los Angeles County campus.

Sheriff's deputies in riot gear were called out to break up the fracas, arresting four teens.



### **No-hate zone**

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Today, students acknowledge there are still problems at the school, but say there have been significant strides in race relations, creating a more positive environment.

"Our pole is a new way to express diversity in our community," Jamie Long, a senior and a member of Hart's Associated Student Body, told students, faculty and visitors gathered Tuesday in Hart's central courtyard for the dedication. "It symbolizes our commitment to nonviolence on our campus."

The William S. Hart Union School District has experienced several race-related problems in recent years. In February 2006, at least half a dozen students at Golden Valley High School were arrested following racial clashes. And in 2005, the parents of four African American students at Valencia High School sued the school district, alleging it failed to adequately address continued racial abuse and discrimination against their children. The plaintiffs received a \$300,000 settlement.

Hart senior Tessa Sicotte-Kelly remembers the friction that permeated the 2,500-student campus in the months leading up to the April 2006 brawl. Whites, blacks and Latinos segregated themselves. Racial slurs were not

uncommon.

"People were so separated," recalled Sicotte-Kelly, 17. "It was insanely cliquey. And a lot of that was about race."

While divisions still exist, Sicotte-Kelly said "there's definitely less tension." She and many other students who attended Tuesday's ceremony wore a black T-shirt that read, "No Haters Here."

School district officials said Golden Valley and Valencia High have made strides toward embracing a culture of inclusion. But they said at Hart -- the Santa Clarita Valley's most ethnically diverse school with a student population that is 57% white, 31% Latino, 6% Asian and 3% black -- that commitment has been taken a step further. The school has earned recognition from the county as a model for human relations.

Students have formed a group called Change of Hart where members from different racial backgrounds can talk through differences and devise solutions to problems. The group also brings in speakers on diversity and racial tolerance.

Last year, a Hispanic Day of Celebration was organized, during which students prepared national dishes and highlighted Latino traditions; in February, Black History Month was marked at Hart for the first time in the school's 61-year history.

Sicotte-Kelly, who is white, said she had made friends across the racial divide since joining Change of Hart. Nancy Arteaga, a co-president of the group, whose family

is from El Salvador, said she had noticed more instances of students from different ethnic groups hanging out together.

Joshua Tanamachi Parr, a consultant with the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations, has been assigned to Hart as a liaison since December to create programs that address and combat race-related problems and concerns.

Parr said it was inevitable that some students would practice "self-segregation" but he is encouraged that efforts are being made to change that. These include developing a more diverse student body government and reexamining a system that often separates students of certain races into remedial classes, which helps perpetuate racial stereotypes, Parr said.

In addition, the school's staff is undergoing diversity training, and a new cultural awareness program has been launched that will involve students sharing their heritage and experiences with others.

Parr is also working to foster greater cooperation between the two parents' associations that exist at Hart. One is a traditional parent group, while the other caters primarily to non-English-speaking parents.

Until such initiatives take root, there is hope on campus that the peace pole will provide a measure of inspiration.

"It signifies our commitment to resolving any problems on campus, so that we might be a model for our community," Principal Collyn J. Nielsen said.

"We're setting an example, and showing that we're not just a school about fighting," said Jose Garcia, Change of Hart's joint leader. "When you come together you get things done."

The five-sided peace pole is engraved with the message "May Peace Prevail on Earth" in 10 languages, among them English, Spanish, Korean, Arabic and Mandarin Chinese.

"I'm hoping that people will take it seriously and commit to peace, and commit to unity," said Rayven Hicks, an African American senior at Hart.

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