

An Observer Reports...

By Miriam Silver

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It appears the typical classroom of teen-agers, 9th-graders all hither and yon, loaded down with backpacks, dark sweatshirts and excited voices. But soon they take their seats, a group of them at a table up front, one or two setting up a video camera, another with a tape machine, and two more with still cameras.



Nancy Wang talking with Miriam Silver after class interview

The teacher settles quietly to her desk in the back. A visitor takes a seat facing the class. And everyone quiets down, respect moving into the classroom like a mysterious new student.

Nancy Wang is at center stage. A Chinese immigrant, educator and social activist, her soft spoken approach serves to underscore the toughness of her talk, that racism, she declares, against Chinese-Americans, people born and raised here, still exists here and now. "I know there's surprise on your faces, but it's true. You just have to deal with it," Wang said.

Wang is one of several of the "survivors" invited to be interviewed by students as part of the "The Essence of Acceptance," an ongoing education project where human rights are taught to kids not from books, but from the mouths of people who have lost them. The voices are those of nine "survivors," ethnically and racially diverse American men and women from Israel/Palestine, China, Cambodia, Cuba, Mexico and the Dominican Republic. an African American, a Native American, and an Austrian native, a survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp who lost most of her family there.

Now in her 50s, Wang, a Santa Rosa homemaker, mother of three and grandmother of one, told the students that she came to social activism four years ago after voicing concerns of Asian stereotyping when a Rohnert Park police officer shot and killed an Asian man brandishing a wooden pole. Like other survivors interviewed, Wang disarmed the group of Maria Carillo High School students with her forthrightness and honesty.

Asked whether “America includes you in a definition of American,” Wang said: “Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Sometimes I am driving and people will yell, ‘Go Back to China,’” she said. “I know a lot of places still cannot treat us as equal. I know people don’t believe that, but it’s true. Someone in court said to a judge of Chinese ancestry whose family has been here for four generations, “You don’t have a right to be here. Go back.”

And so it goes. So easily spoken now, but of times more difficult and a reminder that they can happen again. The Maria Carillo 9th-graders, 14- and 15-year-old Humanities and English students, were the first to try the project, learning about the concept of human rights in a manner familiar to historians, journalists and cultural anthropologists.

Through oral history interviewing, videotaping, audiotaping, photographing and drawing, the high school students went to the source, or rather, the source came to them.

“When you read a book, it’s not real. When you listen to someone’s experience, it’s completely different,” said student Jenny Kim.

The “Essence of Acceptance” is a program of the Sonoma County Survivor Project, a human rights organization that promotes acceptance and diversity through oral history, art and photography. Founding member and director, Phyllis Rosenfield describes the project “as a way to confront prejudice and hatred and create pathways to acceptance.” It grew out of the Sonoma County Survivor Project created 10 years ago by Rosenfield and Lisa Slater. Together the two women compiled oral histories and photographs, new and old, of survivors from the Holocaust, Japanese-Americans whose civil rights were violated when interned during World War II and Cambodia refugees who fled the Pol Pot regime. That work was displayed first at the Sonoma County Museum in 1991, and has now become a freestanding traveling show that goes to libraries, civil rights and religious groups, colleges and high schools around the Bay Area.

As interest grew in that show, Rosenfield, a former elementary school teacher, envisioned a school curriculum. “The program gets deep into the issue of acceptance and suffering for human loss and learning how to apply that,” said Rosenfield.

In the Essence of Acceptance, students choose who they want to interview from a list of people Rosenfield provides. Then they do background research and prepare a list of interview questions. When the “survivor” comes to the classroom, a panel of students does the interviewing, while others share tasks of audiotaping, videotaping, and taking still photographs. Others can draw, paint or take notes on the interview. Later some students transcribe or write summaries of what they heard. The kids then create follow-up questions for a second or even third interview.

“The idea of the program is to really help them explore the concept of human rights and how and when those kinds of things have been compromised at different points in history,” said social studies teacher Dorothy Patch-Kennedy. “We can provide them with all the rich text and films and materials. But when they actually get to interact with real people and hear about their experience and their story, it hits them at a deeper level,” she said. “When they listened to the Holocaust survivor, they were absolutely riveted.”

Student Rob Chandler gained new perspective. “It makes me feel we think our problems are so big, but once you hear their problems, it’s not even close,” said Rob.

Rosenfield maintains that people learn in different ways. Thus the curriculum is both academic and project-based. “Having real people come in from the community and talk with the kids is quite meaningful. They have to prepare for it,” Rosenfield said. “I hope that by hearing stories from community members it brings history alive. Human rights abuses hurt all of us. When we don’t guard our rights carefully, rights are lost. Students apply the lessons they learn from the speakers to their own lives. They will think about how they treat people when they walk by someone abusing someone else - hopefully they’ll think about the consequence of not saying or doing anything.”

After Nancy Wang’s talk, the students remembered details. “I thought it was very surprising to hear so many stereotypes were still going on,” said Charmaine Collier.

Humanities teacher Ken Emery said initially he wasn’t sure ninth-graders were mature enough to benefit from the program, but after taking three classes and 60 students through it, he said he’d bring it to his classroom again. “If nothing else, it helps them attach a face and person to an experience of things they’ve heard about or read about in the past,” Emery said.

Students agree.

“It was a lot better. We got to be more involved. You got to listen to someone else’s story and got to have an opinion,” said student Colton Cruse. “It sticks in your mind, more than if you’re reading it,” said Katie Stone.

From Shoah survivor Vera Korkus, students noted her demeanor as she told the story of seeing her mother for the last time, separated into a line for those who would go into the gas chamber.

“She always had that same expression on her face, so you’d think she’d break down when she watched her mom die. I could never do that,” said Cruse.

“I’d be bawling. But I think she kind of was used to it but hurt inside,” said student Lissie Renteria.

Students also were impressed with Morris Turner, an African American professor at Sonoma State University, who grew up in the Bay Area and wrote a book on black townships. Turner told about his family being unable to buy a house in a neighborhood where blacks were forbidden. He recalled winning an athletic award in high school, only to be told the prize wasn't being awarded anymore.

"It was surprising to hear it so close to home, how people mistreated him because of race," said student Danielle Fry. "It was interesting to see how he turned his whole life around from those experiences."