

HATE MAIL FOLLOWS ARTICLE ON HER IMMIGRANT KIDS' TEACHER TARGETED

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Body

For the first nine years, Angela Steele's job teaching English to immigrant children at Sequoia High School was pretty much what one would expect -- honing students' grammar, exposing them to Shakespeare and encouraging them to write about what it's like coming to America.

During the past year, however, something has changed: Steele became someone's target in the fight against illegal immigration.

Since the Mercury News published a profile of her last year, she has received three angry and sarcastic letters from illegal-immigration opponents -- two anonymous and one signed.

The number may seem small considering the tons of mail generated in the national debate on immigration. But it's unusual for someone so far removed from the political struggle to be targeted.

"It's appalling someone should be singled out for doing a great job," said Sequoia Principal Earl Walker. He wasn't aware of any other teachers receiving similar mail.

Steele said she thinks the letter writers' efforts are misdirected. "I don't control the border," she said.

Bette Hammond agrees. She's founder of the Novato-based STOPIT, Stop the Out-of-control Problems of Immigration Today.

One of the letters Steele received recently -- a sarcastic gift certificate entitling the bearer "to 100 illegal immigrants" -- was printed by STOPIT last fall. Hammond said STOPIT had encouraged members to send them to their lawmakers, not to people like Steele.

"I really feel bad for this teacher," said Hammond, whose organization has merged with another group to become United Citizens for Immigration Control. "I understand this is her job and her life. We would never criticize her or send letters anonymously."

At the bottom of the gift certificate mailed to Steele, someone wrote: "You are on every list now being circulated throughout this state. Have a nice day." A week later, Steele got another letter, a photocopy of a letter from Gov. Pete Wilson thanking someone for supporting Proposition 187, the ballot initiative approved by California voters last fall to deny public services to illegal immigrants.

The Redwood City Police Department is investigating, but there is little police can do because none of the letters is threatening.

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"I'd like to know what their final intention is," said Officer Donald Banks. "We're not going to let her get hurt. She's just doing her job."

Steele received her first letter a few days after a March 1994 Mercury News profile. Signed "S. O'Neal" and marked with a Mountain View return address, it blasted her for publishing a collection of students' stories about coming to the United States, sometimes illegally.

"By encouraging your illegal Mexican/Central American immigrant students to openly flaunt . . . their utter disregard for the laws of this country, you not only set a negative example for them, but for other students as well," the letter said.

" . . . Despite your efforts and our tax dollars, (illegal immigrant students) are doomed to remain always an underclass, having no value other than the source of cheap, docile labor, and breeders for The Catholic Church."

Steele's reaction: "It sickens me, really, that there are people who think like that out there. That they're so ready to scapegoat. They just want an easy place to dump their hatred and frustration."

Steele has shared all the three letters with her students. "I wanted them to be aware of some of the sentiments out there," she said.

It turned into a good lesson on California, democracy and prejudice, she said. When one student reacted by condemning all white people, she seized the opportunity to teach about the danger of generalizations.

Last week, her students wrote their feelings about the letters for the Mercury News. Sometimes their English is rough, but their messages are clear:

"We know that we are illegals, but some racist people are illegal too because the Indians discovered this country and so they don't have to fight against us because is not their country too," one wrote. "We are people, just like them, we are not animals. We are not animals!"

Another student wrote, "I really feel so bad about these letters. And I want to know, why this people hate us. We didn't make anything bad in this country, that only thing that we want in this country is look for a better future."

Notes

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Graphic

Photos (2);

PHOTO: TOM VAN DYKE -- MERCURY NEWS

Angela Steele, teacher of English as a second language, talks with student Maria Meza.

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PHOTO: Steele

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