

A CITY DIVIDED;
It seemed simple: The police of Orange would sweep the streets clean of
illegal immigrants. But then the controversy began

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Byline: Susan Paterno, The Register

Body

"White Pride." "Anti-Mex." "American Front." The slogans are spray-painted on a wall that separates El Modena High School in Orange from apartments where immigrant workers live.

From Chapman Avenue, one of the city's two main thoroughfares, the graffiti is hidden from view, much like the undercurrent of anger and suspicion that has gripped this town of 100,000 residents that calls itself "the most desirable city to live in Southern California."

Breaking ranks with the other cities in the county, the Orange City Council and Police Department last month started assisting US Immigration and Naturalization Service authorities: Officers began arresting illegal immigrants on minor misdemeanors such as jaywalking and littering, and handing over the undocumented to INS officials for deportation.

The INS responded by conducting two early-morning raids in the past three weeks to pick up illegal workers along East Chapman Avenue, detaining 260 people.

John Donar, 52, is among those in the predominantly white East Chapman Avenue business community who cheered the police action. Two years ago, Donar began putting pressure on the police to rid Chapman Avenue of "those illegals," he said.

"They're here illegally and should be arrested. It's a disheartening thing to see this be allowed to happen. (Illegal immigrants) are a threat to our way of life."

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But the move to clear the streets of illegal workers has antagonized local immigrant-rights leaders and some legal Hispanic residents who fear police are basing their enforcement on race.

The crackdown also has been surrounded by a confusion of fact and rumor (see story below) that has pitted groups of residents against each other and left many not knowing what to believe.

"Who knows anymore what's true and what isn't," said Dan Gomez, a longtime resident of El Modena, the Hispanic neighborhood where police have concentrated their enforcement. He questions whether the current crackdown is "the best use of police time and money."

Last week, a dozen people carrying signs that read "Jobs not jails" and "Earth has no boundaries" stood on East Chapman Avenue street corners to protest the police action. At a recent City Council meeting, an angry resident accused city officials of "racism" and "bigotry" after a homemaker testified that police officers had entered the home of her neighbor to pursue undocumented workers.

Legal residents fear they will be subjected to the same treatment, Delia Wilkes said, "simply because we have brown skin."

Jess F. Perez, mayor of Orange and a Hispanic, defends the police action.

"Ninty-nine out of 100 of these workers are the best people you'd ever want to be associated with," Perez said. "But how do you isolate that one?"

That's why the city through its police action is "trying to discourage the men from gathering in large numbers" he said.

To the accusations by residents that the policy is racist, Perez said, "I categorically deny it. I or the community shouldn't have to prove by actions that we're not racist. That kind of question is like asking us, 'When did you stop beating my wife?' "

For more than 30 years, Perez has lived in El Modena, which is about 3 miles east of the stately Victorian homes and tree-lined circle that grace the city's turn-of-the-century "Old Towne."

El Modena was for generations a community of farm workers, drawn to Orange from Mexico to work on the ranches and in the citrus groves and ranches. For most of its history it remained separate, physically and racially, from the rest of the city's population.

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In the 1960s and '70s, El Modena was engulfed by a tide of commercial strips, supermarkets, apartment buildings, minimalls and fast-food restaurants, blurring the lines that once separated wealthy from poor, people of color from whites, illegal immigrants from legal citizens.

As economic conditions in Mexico worsened the past few years, more workers appeared on the streets of Orange, prompting local merchants to complain that their presence discouraged the patronage of well-heeled customers and threatened property values.

And so, in February, the police took action.

Orange residents express a wide range of opinions about illegal immigrants and how to cope with their growing numbers. Some say the majority are criminals and Communists best dealt with by deportation.

Others insist the workers are forced to line the streets by poverty and hopelessness that should be alleviated.

While the debate over the crackdown goes on, orange and white squad cars roam East Chapman Avenue and the streets of El Modena, stopping to question and detain Hispanic men as they sit on benches, or buy gas at the Shell station, or shop in the Albertson's supermarket or hurry to make the 8 a.m. Spanish-language Mass at La Purisima Catholic Church.

The church often finds itself in the middle, serving parishioners living in El Modena garages and in million-dollar hilltop homes. Some want the church to do more; others want it to remain aloof.

"I understand the merchants' problems," said Father David Fleckenstein of La Purisima. "But let's treat these people with a little dignity and human kindness.

"You can't win," Fleckenstein said with a sigh. "It's a question of the haves vs. the have-nots. The problem will probably always be with us."

John Donar said he decided to fight against illegal immigration after visiting the border and seeing "thousands of them coming across. I felt helpless. The arrogance of those people. I feel I'm being invaded."

While at the border, Donar said, he saw "a half-dozen Chinese dressed in black outfits. Who are these people? They're not here to do laundry.

Many are of the criminal element. They're coming from Communist countries.

"They're not all coming here to pick grapes. They're drug dealers, terrorists, Communists. It's not good for America. When are they going

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to start bombing our schools?"

Donar, grandson of Irish immigrants, moved to Orange County in the early '70s from Colombia, where he was a lay worker for an evangelical ministry.

His grandparents came to the United States when immigration "was controlled," he said. "It wasn't like now, this open door." (European immigrants came unchecked to the United States until the early 1920s when Congress first began imposing quotas.)

Today, Donar is president of Christian Resource Management, a financial consulting firm for evangelical Christian churches and missionaries. CRM is located on the second floor of a Chapman Avenue minimall that resembles the dozens of other shopping centers on the street.

In the small office reception area, a photograph of Lee Ezell, wife of Western Regional INS Commissioner Harold Ezell, hangs next to

pictures of Donar's other clients. The office is casual, with large photographs of sailboats and smiling Third World children and the sound of adding machines in the background.

Illegal immigration is contributing to the "deterioration of what was once a Godly country," Donar said. It is as much a problem as "taking prayer out of the schools, allowing abortions and the liberal attitudes of the courts. It's a continual departure from what we built our country on.

"If there are 300 illegals here now, what will happen when there's 1,000? How do they support themselves? On our tax dollars. They'll expand their neighborhoods. Crime will go up."

Mexican-Americans here legally "are nice people," he said. "I have nothing against them. It's the illegals. They have no respect for the law."

Patti Helms agrees. "Most of our windows aren't broken. Yet," she said. "It never bothered me when there were a few. But several hundred?

I've contemplated moving. But I'll fight first."

An Orange homemaker, Helms is organizing her neighborhood to support the police action. "On a one-to-one basis I have sympathy for all

people. As a massive, destructive group, no, I have no sympathy. Not when they're destroying everything I worked so hard to build."

Helms and her husband live in what she calls a "lower middle- class"

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neighborhood. Their yellow house, decorated with teddy bears, needlepoint pillows and plants, abuts the El Modena High School playing field, where many Hispanics play soccer on weekends.

Years ago, when they first moved to Orange, she often peddled her bike a mile or so to the heart of El Modena, hoping to hear Latin music and look at the flower-covered wood porches of the bungalows, so different from the landscaped tract of ranch houses and Bermuda grass lawns where she lives.

Now, though, she refuses to drive past the Osco Drug Store in El Modena without locking her car doors.

Although she has never been assaulted by an illegal immigrant worker, Helms said they "have no respect for me. You can see it in their faces, the way they make gestures with their hands, like they're laughing at you or taunting you.

"I've seen it three or four times," she said.

Hispanics steal oranges from her tree and climb her fence to retrieve lost soccer balls, she said.

"I know they're illegal. You can tell by the way they look that they're not school kids. They're illegal. That means without rights," she said. "And yet you get these people screaming about their civil rights. What about my rights? Don't I have any rights? Why do all these illegals have rights? I start to cry when I think about it."

Juan Martinez, 27, has just arrived from Mexico in the trunk of an immigrant smuggler's car. Now he waits for work on Chapman avenue.

Martinez (a pseudonym because he fears deportation) came to Orange hoping to send back enough money to feed his family and help repay the medical expenses that forced his mother to sell the family business after his father's recent death.

"I miss my family being here. Family is everything to Mexicans. I work harder when I think about my little girl, knowing that my work will keep her from going hungry and make sure she has shoes. I have no choice. I have to be here," he said. "There is no work for me in Mexico."

Two weeks ago, Martinez was walking home from church with friends and a Register reporter. Laughing and talking, Martinez didn't see two blond teen-age joggers in shorts approaching. When the girls passed,

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Martinez turned suddenly and bumped into one of them, sputtering a polite apology.

One girl shouted obscenities and the other muttered "God, these goddamn beaners are so gross, they're everywhere now."

Startled, Martinez explained in Spanish, "I didn't see them. What did they say?" And then, he added, offhandedly, "I never understand what they say. I think it's better, don't you?"

Many of the workers come from small Mexican villages with names such as Maltrata and Esperanza, words that mean "Badly Treated" and "Hope."

Martinez came three months ago from a small town near Veracruz, a large industrial city on the Atlantic coast.

After his father's death, Martinez said he became the sole support of his mother, sister, wife and daughter. In Mexico, he looked for work in the oil fields around Veracruz, but found hundreds of unemployed men doing the same. With little choice and not much desire, he saved to pay for a smuggler to get him to the United States, kissed his family goodbye and boarded a battered bus to the border.

The bus left him in Tijuana with barely enough money to buy a plate of beans. A week after arriving, he found a coyote, or smuggler, and waited to cross when the federal guards changed shifts. He arrived in Orange several hours later, squeezed in a car trunk with four men.

Life in Orange County has been difficult. Martinez goes days without work and has more than once spent 10 hours digging ditches for an employer who promised to arrive the next day with a paycheck and never did.

He lives with 15 other workers in a sparse, well-scrubbed two-bedroom El Modena apartment decorated with yellowing Mexican travel posters and hanging plants. Most of the hundreds of residents in the complex are workers from Mexico, Martinez said.

The buildings look fairly new but in need of landlord care: Large patches of dirt show through weedy grass that workers sometimes dig up to plant small vegetable gardens.

Each man who lives with Martinez pays \$ 90 a month, plus \$ 35 a week for board. A married couple and their baby share a cubbyhole in the kitchen, partitioned with a sheet; the rest sleep on the second floor in bedrolls they neatly fold every morning before leaving at 6 a.m. to stand on the Chapman Avenue street corners.

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Like the other men, Martinez dresses in rummage-sale clothes, but with a flair for fashion. When he goes to church, his main diversion, he wears a pressed white shirt and tweed jacket.

Last week he wore to work a button-down-collar shirt, pressed blue jeans and milk-white tennis shoes. As he does every morning, he rose at 5 a.m. and walked a mile to the shopping center dominated by the Osco Drug Store.

Once there, Martinez joined about a dozen workers furtively scanning the road for potential employers.

As they waited, the men joked, asked one another about English words, and talked about families, friends and the future. "We'll work hard, hard as burros for people," Martinez said, as he and his friends turned over deeply calloused hands. "But sometimes they treat us worse than burros."

Martinez was among those who found no work that day, a result, he suspected, of the recent INS raids that left employers scared.

Discouraged, Martinez went back to his apartment to study for that night's English as a Second Language class held in an El Modena High School classroom decorated for St. Patrick's Day with shamrocks and leprachauns.

He likes Americans, he said, but he feels he has to know his place: "Do you want me to walk behind you?" he asked, noticing how the patrons of a local restaurant stared at him. "You never see Americans walking with Mexicans here. Americans don't like to do that, do they?"

Charity also makes him uncomfortable. "In Mexico, the man pays for the woman," he said. "Here we can't do that and it makes us feel

embarrassed. Please take these," he said, handing over two apples, an offer in exchange for Sunday breakfast.

What extra money he earns, he sends home, knowing it keeps his daughter in school and her stomach full. "She's so smart," he said. "One day, she'll be a professional, a doctor or a lawyer. Education.

That's what will assure her future."

He feels no antipathy toward the police or INS officials, even though twice in two weeks he found himself with friends "running like bulls through streets and alleys" to escape them. "They're just doing their job," he said. "They have families to feed too."

Dan Gomez, 49, a former El Modena restaurant owner, grew up and attended segregated schools in the community. He fears the police are

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arresting people based on their race. And he hopes the practice will stop. The son of migrant farmworkers, Gomez believes the city should take a more conciliatory approach.

Though he sympathizes with the merchants, Gomez said "the problems (the workers) create are not as pronounced as the police would have you believe." Most start lining the street at 5:30 a.m. but are usually gone by 10, he said, adding, "the truth is this problem has always existed."

Two weeks ago, Gomez and his son watched INS vans speed through the El Modena streets, escorted by Orange police officers through stoplights and barricades. They chased men through restaurant parking lots, backyards and apartment complexes "like dog catchers," Gomez said.

With camera in hand, Gomez jumped in his car and followed the convoy back to City Hall, where he saw police officers stop a gardening truck, drag the Hispanic passenger out by his collar and demand to see his identification.

After the gardener proved his legal status, the officer climbed back on his motorcycle and returned to the waiting INS vans, where officials "laughed and joked about what a great day they were having and how many

illegals they got. It was really degrading," Gomez said. "This kind of stuff has got to stop."

Gomez is discouraged. "People forget that farmworkers from Mexico kept this area growing for years," he said.

In Gomez's youth, El Modena was a few bungalows connected by dirt roads, surrounded by fertile fields and brown hills. He remembers growing up in his parents' El Modena grocery store which doubled as the family's living quarters.

Over the years, he watched housing tracts replace the fields and homes sprout like weeds on the hills overlooking his large, wood-shingled, ivy-covered home with roses, cactus and azaleas in the front-yard garden.

In that time, Gomez also saw Orange become a city that promotes cooperation among the races. Today, he worries the police action will alienate Mexican-American residents. "What if I or somebody like me leaves my wallet at home and we get stopped? You're on your way to

Tijuana, no questions asked," he said. "You just disappear."

That happens, said police spokesman Sgt. Timm Browne.

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Already, the police have sent several legal residents to the border.

In return for the hours-long detainment, the residents received free transportation back to Orange, he said.

The police action has left Gomez feeling unsettled, he said. "When the city uses the police to do the job of the INS," he said, "it

doesn't present a positive image. There's no way to tell the illegals from the legals. They can't stop every Hispanic who drives by. It's not fair to the rest of us."

Seventy-year-old David Tumbelston refrains from giving his opinion on politics. He simply wants to help. A retired Marine, Tumbelston teaches

English to illegal immigrants at the El Modena community center. He also attends church with John Donar.

Poverty, Tumbelston said, brings the workers to Orange. And jobs will keep them coming, he added. "When you hear the stories of a Mexican father with three kids making \$ 1 a day and he can't feed his family, you don't turn your back."

As long as a need remains, Tumbelston will help. "The good book says: 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me to drink. I was naked and you gave me clothes.' That's a good enough reason for me."

CUT E: Businessman John Donar welcomes the crackdown on illegal immigrants in Orange.

CUT F: Longtime resident Dan Gomez questions whether the effort is worth the time and expense.

CUT G: Retiree David Tumbelston aids Orange's illegal immigrants by teaching them English.

Graphic

BLACK & WHITE PHOTO; MAP; A police officer issues a citation to the driver of a gardening firm truck while another officer checks the IDs of two passengers at the corner of Hewes Street and Chapman Avenue in Orange.; Sun sets on East Chapman Avenue in El Modena.; A new housing development rises on a hillside behind one of the few remaining agricultural fields in Orange.; The Sunday morning Spanish-language Mass attracts an overflow crowd, including many immigrants, to La Purisima Catholic Church.; Two day laborers wait for a job offer at 6; 30 a.m. along Hewes Street in Orange.

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