Bella Vista clears air after brawl

Following racially tinged fight, school leaders act to ease tensions.

By Deepa Ranganathan -- Bee Staff Writer
Published 2:15 am PST Sunday, November 27, 2005

It all started with a bump.

Passing between classes, a junior smacked into a sophomore near the girls' locker room at Bella Vista High School in Fair Oaks.

The sophomore wasn't having it.

The bump turned into an argument, and the argument escalated into a one-sided shoving match. A crowd gathered to watch the lopsided confrontation between the two boys.

So far, it was nothing special.

But another boy, an African American, plunged in to help his white friend, the one refusing to fight. The black student bumped into a bystander who muttered an ugly word:

The N-word.

That moment would turn a petty argument on Oct. 20 into an all-out brawl that involved 50 students, resulted in 29 suspensions and led to another incident whose devastating impact, one administrator would later say, "was like Chernobyl."

The event - and those that followed - could have left the school with ugly scars.

But it didn't. Students spoke up. Administrators listened and acted. The disaster looming ahead never happened.

And Bella Vista High started to study its own fault lines in a way that few had suspected was necessary.

Like so many other schools in the Sacramento area, the campus on Madison Avenue is growing more racially diverse. A decade ago, just one out of 10 students was non-white. Now, every fifth student belongs to a racial minority group.

Those changing demographics can lead to tension. Last year, Elk Grove Unified, a once-rural

district that has exploded into Northern California's largest, convened a task force to study unity issues after race-related incidents at two of its high schools.

Bella Vista largely has avoided that kind of conflict. If there's racial tension at the school, it's not outwardly evident. During breaks, kids of different races mingle easily in the circular courtyard.

"Fights just don't happen here," said Vice Principal Debby Ashton.

So when 150 students flooded the hallway to watch 50 other kids fight that Thursday morning in October, administrators weren't prepared.

"All hell broke loose," said Vice Principal Sheila Holley. "It was a riot mentality."

Students jumped into the fray to defend their friends. Others held each other back and got clobbered by stray fists.

When the principal, Marlyn Pino-Jones, waded in, someone shoved her. A custodian tried to help. He got shoved, too.

Holley stood at the periphery and collared "the students with the reddest faces," she recalled. Then she radioed the front office.

"Ring the bell!" she yelled.

The fighting stopped. The administrators and a sheriff's deputy they had called started hauling kids in for questioning.

The orderly process of discipline took over. Vice principals suspended students all morning, and by lunchtime seven or eight had been sent home.

The incident didn't make sense to administrators. "It was like a match when it gets lit," Ashton said. "I know the culture here. The kids aren't into fighting, so we were all very puzzled."

But some of them realized that although the fight didn't start as a racial incident, students perceived it as one.

"The kids I talked to had already gotten ripples of gossip," said Anna Jackson, a student assistance program specialist.

Around noon, a white student angrily approached Holley. "Why are you only suspending the black students and not the white students?" she recalls him asking.

He had just spotted three white students on campus who were involved in the fight, he told her.

Holley said the three had been suspended and had returned without permission.

"But there was a perception that we had been unfair. And (students) were enraged, understandably," she said.

After a second, unrelated fight erupted in the courtyard, Pino-Jones asked the Sheriff's Department to beef up its presence at the school and called an emergency staff meeting.

"We wanted to find out what the core of all of this was," she said.

As it happened, the worst was still to come.

After school, a group of five boys gathered at someone's house and logged onto MySpace.com, a popular site that's part Weblog, part social network.

The boys, all white, crafted a message that opened with a racial slur and warned black students not to "mess with us again," according to Michael Alexander, 16.

Alexander, an African American and a junior at Bella Vista, saw the posting. One of the authors was a friend, he said.

"I wanted to fight him, but I didn't," Alexander said recently, his long frame folded into a chair in the school's office. "Me fighting him is not going to make him less racist."

In the days that followed, there were rumors of students trading violent threats and people planning to bring weapons to school. Parents started exchanging panicked phone calls.

"My daughter came home and she was just terrified about going to the school," said Trish Sisneros, president of the school's parent-teacher group. "She was like, 'Please, Mom, don't make me go. I don't want to be hit by gunfire.' "

The day after the fight, the principal had passed out a letter for students to take home to parents. "We want you to know safety is our primary concern," it said. "We have investigated the incidents and have given consequences to several students.

"We also want you to know that contrary to some rumors, these incidents were not racially motivated."

The letter was meant to calm people down. It ended up making some people angrier.

Lauren Kennedy, a junior of mixed race and a recent transplant from a Bay Area school, had never felt unwelcome at Bella Vista. But the day after the fights, she entered the school warily.

"I was scanning the crowd," she said. "It could be the person sitting next to you."

Kennedy recalls seeing the principal's letter, then simmering through fifth period until she could hit the hallways to find her friends.

"Did you read this?" she asked them.

Kennedy and her friends - a group of eight to 10 black, white and Latino students - knew someone had hurled a racial slur during the previous day's fight. They headed for the office and demanded a meeting with Pino-Jones.

A refusal, Kennedy said, would have been so alienating that she would have considered switching schools. "Honestly, if they had just completely blew us off and didn't want to hear

what we had to say, it would have been to the point where we would feel like it was everybody at school and the administration against us," she said.

But Pino-Jones agreed to meet - along with the vice principals, an adviser and a counselor. The first thing they did was talk about the letter. The administrators didn't think it contained an error.

"I still don't believe that the fights were racially motivated," Pino-Jones said later. "Did it become racial afterwards? Absolutely. But it didn't start that way. People made it into that."

Both sides agreed on one thing: There were some students who could stand to learn respect.

So one day nearly two weeks ago, students crowded into the school gym. Some perched on bleachers, others sprawled on the floor. Their chatter echoed off the walls.

Davey D - a.k.a. David Hickman - picked up a microphone as administrators watched nervously. The school was taking a chance on Davey D, the host of a popular morning show on hip-hop radio station 103.5 FM ("The Bomb"). A counselor knew him and had suggested he talk to the students about tolerance. The other administrators agreed - but they had never heard his radio show and didn't know exactly what he would say.

"There was a lot of concern," Holley said.

Bella Vista was trying something new. Teachers had used third period that day to talk about prejudice as part of the Southern Poverty Law Center's national Mix It Up curriculum. Davey D was, in effect, the day's keynote speaker.

"Talking about prejudice, race - these things are so delicate," said Jackson, the student assistance program specialist who helped organize the day's events. "Everyone was worried that parents would be really angry about the way we handled it. And then how hard would it be to do something like this in the future?"

But Davey D was a hit. He talked about growing up white in mostly black New Orleans. He exhorted the kids to hold doors for each other, be nice to teachers, respect each other regardless of differences.

"Treat people like they want to be treated," he told the students. "It's so simplistic it's complicated. It's so easy it's hard."

It wasn't the most original message. But Davey D had credibility that the administrators didn't.

"It was so awesome, what he had to say," said senior Kimberlee Harwood. "I think a lot of people paid attention."

An assembly and a single class period weren't enough to reverse all the damage that had been done. Michael Alexander says he's comfortable at school again. But his friendship with one of the authors of the MySpace posting is over.

"I don't talk to him. He said, 'Sorry,' but ... ," Alexander said, his voice trailing off.

Still, calm has returned to Bella Vista. The students who were suspended have returned. The

boys behind the MySpace posting have apologized. Pino-Jones said staff members have formed a committee to figure out how to incorporate diversity training into the everyday life of the school.

Earlier this month, she sent a newsletter to parents explaining the school's new emphasis on "cultural education."

"I encourage you to have discussions at home about solving conflicts with peers without being confrontational," she wrote.

Kennedy, the student who requested a conference with the principal, said the MySpace incident was an education in itself. And she thinks the administration's willingness to talk - and encourage others to do so - is promising.

"It would take another situation to know if everything has changed," she said. "But it seems like they're trying to get through to everybody, and a lot of people are listening."

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