Planning for the future

UCI students drop by the Westside while exploring Orange County’s changing ethnic makeup.

Deirdre Newman
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WESTSIDE — If the producers of “The O.C.” ever want to get to know the diverse ethnic flavor of Orange County, they should take a tour with Victor Becerra, the executive director of UC Irvine's Community Outreach Partnership Center.

They would discover a me-lange of residents from Vietnamese in Little Saigon in Westminster to Latinos in the Westside of Costa Mesa.

On Friday, Becerra led graduate students in UC Irvine’s planning, policy and design department on a bus tour to three cities with burgeoning ethnic communities. The tour allowed the students to get a firsthand introduction to the demographic changes taking place in Orange County.

The goal is to inspire them to participate in community problem solving while they are at UCI, using the expertise they learn from their classes. And it was a heady first day of school for the approximate 50 students who took the tour.

"It's wonderful," said Anne Wessells, 30, who is working on a doctorate in social ecology. "One of the best aspects of doing graduate work at UCI and in Orange County is that Orange County is so representative of demographic shifts in the state. If we’re able to get out in the community, it will make us more adept and effective planners."

The students started the day in Santa Ana, where they visited the Delhi Center, a community center that has been providing social and health services for the neighborhood since 1969. After a 10-year campaign to build a new structure, the center was finally able to move from the Quonset huts it started in to an $8-million, 26,000-square-foot building last year.

The center, which mainly serves Mexican Americans, is fondly referred to as the “field of dreams” by many residents, Becerra said.

In Westminster, the students toured Little Saigon with City Council member Andy Quach and learned how the Vietnamese community has parlayed its entrepreneurial spirit into a growing economic and political power.

And after lunch, the last stop on the tour was in Costa Mesa, where they heard about the struggles facing the Westside, including redevelopment.

Community leaders Bill Turpit, a member of the Costa Mesa Redevelopment Advisory Committee; Eleanor Egan, a former planning commissioner; and Alma Marquez, organizer of the Orange County Congregational Community Organization, shared their experiences of working collaboratively within the community.

Marquez discussed working with code enforcement to crack down on substandard housing, which resulted in the department boosting its officers from four to nine, with some exclusively devoted to the Westside.

Egan touted community efforts that got litter containers placed on West 19th Street, utilities placed underground and odors reduced in the industrial area.

Turpit said involving UCI students in the community is important because they infuse the process with energy.

"These students represent a tremendous resource and bring with them enthusiasm and creative ideas that we should be taking advantage of in as many community projects as we can," Turpit said.