

Awards honor folks who make Davis better

BY ELAJE LOPEZ

Enterprise correspondent

When the Davis City Council recognizes the winners of this year's Thong Hy Huynh awards on Tuesday, they'll be recognizing a diverse group of Davis residents who have exemplified the goals of diversity, community, social justice and equal rights — just as the awards were intended to do when they were established in the wake of a horrible tragedy.

The awards are named after Thong Hy Huynh, who was murdered in a racially motivated stabbing at Davis High School on May 4, 1983.

Selected by the city's Human Relations Commission, the awards are given in four categories. This year they go to a student group at Davis High School; a longtime teacher at the school; a beloved local rabbi; and a woman dedicated to the children most at risk for falling through the cracks.

All will be honored in a ceremony beginning at 6 p.m. Tuesday in the community chambers, 23 Russell Blvd. The awardees are:

■ Young Humanitarians Award: Student Solidarity Task Force

Last fall, acts of hate committed at Davis High School left the community

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shocked and angered.

Graffiti with racial slurs aimed at African-Americans and swastikas with anti-Semitic phrases were spray painted on the walls of school bathrooms, while posters put up by the Gay-Straight Alliance at the school were torn down or ruined.

"You can go all day thinking, 'Oh, it was another hate incident or racial slur. What's new?,' but when you hear the words that are actually spoken, it can carry a lot of power," says Black Student Union member and DHS junior Tiyanane Kamba-Griffin.

She is now a member of the Student Solidarity Task Force, formed by DHS principal Tom McHale and School Climate Coordinator Kate Snow in the aftermath of the hate incidents.

Senior Talya Kalman was drawn to the group because of a personal need to end indifference towards the discrimination she knows exists.

"People were saying (the anti-Semitic graffiti was) not a big deal and that it's just a joke... I have family members who've died in the Holocaust and my grandfather was a Holocaust survivor, so when I hear people say it was 'just a joke,' I realize it's just this lack of awareness," explained Kalman.

Soon after being formed, the group quickly began to work towards solutions and ways to connect more to the student body.

An assembly organized by the task force was held where cards were passed out to all DHS students to write their perspectives about the situation. The student task force then held a series of both staff-wide and community-wide panels to open dialogues about the hate acts and experiences in the community with discrimination and prejudice. They found great success with each one.

The task force's hard work has since paid off: the group was nominated for a Thong Hy Huynh Award and will receive the recognition on Tuesday.

"I think it's really cool to see the community recognize the work we do to create change, because that's what this is all about," said senior and Gay-Straight Alliance president Rocket Drew.

As for the future, the group's main goal is to educate students on the experiences many people have with discrimination and, through that, create empathy and understanding to prevent hate acts from ever being committed again.

They hope to continue their work in a series of recorded stories that reflect the difficulties students face with prejudice which they will release for the student body to hear.

Sophomore member Larissa Libet is hopeful about the effect the group has had and will have in the future.

"A lot of people think that Davis is this liberal bubble, but I don't think it is in the way most expect it to be...it's not in the way that it's completely shut off from things like racism and sexism and anti-Semitism, but in the way that a lot more gets done here in Davis than in other places."

■ Excellence in Community Involvement: Rabbi Greg Wolfe

In his 23 years at Congregation Bet Haverim in Davis, Rabbi Greg Wolfe's value of unity has shone through in his work.

After the 1999 fire bombings of three Sacramento synagogues, the religious community came together to support those affected by the burning of their houses of worship.

"It showed me the power of community," said Wolfe, and he cited it later as an inspiration to him to maintain involvement in the interfaith community here in Davis.

The aftermath of the attacks on 9/11 led to the meeting of Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders in the community to discuss how to honor the victims of the attack as well as how to foster a sense of understanding and respect among the three religious groups. Thus, the Celebration of Abraham was created, and is now an annual gathering for all in the community to share their religion with others in an open space.

In the face of an event that could easily have become negative, the Davis interfaith community was able to turn it into a positive space to share and learn about others.

"Davis is a wonderful community because it's small enough that you know people and are connected, but we're big enough to have lots of diversity, so it's a great opportunity to learn from each other and support each other," said Wolfe.

This is the goal he brings to everything he does: Rather than shutting out those who are not like us or who we don't necessarily agree with, actually listen to gain understanding of others' beliefs and come together through kindness.

This year, his own family hosted an Arab Muslim high school student from Israel as part of the Youth Exchange and Study Program.

Wolfe also recently joined a coalition called Sacramento Act, which empowers individuals to address issues of racial and social injustice, is part of an interfaith environmental justice group and has done work with the Phoenix Coalition.



WOLFE
Community leader

He also participated in the Davis Walk of Faith this year, walking from the synagogue to the mosque and then the Methodist Church. About 250 people attended to show support for connections between all three religious communities.

Receiving the Thong Huy Huynh award, said Wolfe, "can help jump-start more opportunities to learn about our different communities, and how we're different but also so similar.

"There are so many exciting things that can be done and with this award, we can continue to look forward and continue to support each other and build these bridges."

■ Civil Rights Advocacy: Wendi Counta

Working with children had always been Wendi Counta's passion, but when she began working with foster children, she found a new love.

After getting her career started working at day programs for autistic children and preschools and working with youth for more than 20 years, she turned to working with children in the foster care system. It was here that she found her calling as a civil rights advocate for one of the most vulnerable populations: foster children.

"Group homes and congregate care for foster youth was getting a lot of negative attention," she said. "I wanted to change this; I wanted to design a program that ensured our boys were loved and treated like they would be in a family-based home."

Enter Progress Ranch, a group home in Davis for boys 8-12, where Counta has served as executive director since 2012.

What sets the program apart is the strong community involvement Counta brought to the young residents of the home: When boys arrive at the home, she ensures that activities they want to try are available for them to participate in, whether it be learning to swim or bike or going to summer camps, participating in art or dance activities, or taking trips to Disneyland. Many of the boys play in local sports programs — like AYSO soccer and Junior Blue Devils football — and attend Davis public schools.

"We also work with local volunteers that want to mentor our boys to ensure all our boys have loving individuals outside of just the group home to connect and foster a relationship with," Counta said. "We strive to give these boys experiences regardless of being in the foster system."

The boys at Progress Ranch are a huge part of Counta's life, and advocating for them has always been a priority for her.

"I believe many foster youth do not get that unconditional love and caring that they deserve. They have been the victims of

horrific traumas and need the support and love that our community provides," Counta said.

For her efforts on behalf of those youth, as well as the love and care they find at Progress Ranch, Counta on Tuesday will receive the Thong Hy Huynh Award for civil rights advocacy.

■ Lifetime Achievement: Gwyneth Bruch

The history of Gwyneth Bruch's work in the Davis community truly reveals how she embodies exactly what the Thong Hy Huynh awards are all about.

Bruch began her career in Davis teaching at the Transition Academy program, which aimed to help students struggling with conventional teaching styles. Later, when she began teaching drama (and other classes) and directing shows at Davis High School, she was shocked to hear stories shared by students about their encounters with racism and xenophobia at school, including stories told by students of prejudice they faced from classmates when auditioning for shows.

Bruch immediately cancelled the predominantly white-cast show she had planned on doing the following season and replaced it with a story requiring a diverse cast. She recruited students of all different races and ethnicities for the show "Songs of Ourselves."

"They were all different, and most of them had never done anything like this, but it didn't matter. And it was beautiful," said Bruch.

From then on, her focus on social justice never wavered. She is now the host teacher and adviser for the Black Student Union and she makes a point to welcome diversity in everything she does.

After the incidents of hate last fall at Davis High School, Bruch chose The Laramie Project for the spring play, as a way to remind people of what unites us, and to remind us of tragedies that should never befall another human being.

Being nominated for a Thong Hy Huynh Lifetime Achievement Award along with all the other nominees "is very humbling, and I'm so grateful to be in a group with the others that have been nominated," she said.

According to the city, "Bruch embodies so much of what the Thong Hy Huynh Award is intended for: an abiding personal and professional commitment to justice and civil rights, ongoing efforts to use the powers of an institution to open and change people's minds, and the warmth of personal relationships to model the way things could be."

— Elaje Lopez is a student at Davis High School and an Enterprise intern.