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SOCORRO'S ADMONITION brought me back to the first day I'd spent exploring the troubles facing East Palo Alto. I was visiting Ruben Avelar, a youth counselor whose faded, two-tone Buick Skylark travels four times a week from east to west against the traffic of suburbanites driving eastward for their fixes. Avelar counsels high-school students from East Palo Alto, where the underfunding of social services forces 1,200 local teens to travel to elite bedroom communities as far as an hour away to attend high school because their own town has none. They go to Menlo Park, Atherton, Belmont, San Carlos: worlds away.

Avelar himself is a survivor of East Palo Alto's periodic population shifts. He witnessed the town's complete turnover from white to black in the 1950s, when his was one of the town's first Mexican families. "They'd jump me because I was called white—the skin issue was brought to my attention very early," reflected Avelar, whose soft eyes undermine the cool authority communicated by his rigid posture and determined walk. "My best friend when I was growing up was one of the last white people to stay," Avelar recalled. "They decided to move after the doughnut man got robbed. I was devastated. I said, 'Why are you going?' He said, 'Because the coloreds are taking over.'"

When I met Avelar, his Buick emerged from the contours of the

Belmont hills and on into the Carlmont High School campus. Avelar drove past the sign that said "Student Parking By Permit Only," past the new Hondas and Toyotas and through the school's landscape of calla lilies and eucalyptus. He gingerly planted his feet on the pavement, shook the 25-minute trek from East Palo Alto out of his legs and gazed through his sunglasses at the cascading architecture of the school building and down to the verdant, professional-size football field.

Inside, Avelar glanced at a bench outside the principal's door, crowded with kids, their eyes downcast and bored. Only one, who wore a backwards-facing baseball cap and a tie-dyed Megadeth T-shirt, was white. Avelar's eyes fell on a girl in bright red lipstick and a Raiders jacket. "Y *ahora qué?*" the counselor demanded.

"I got caught cutting," she shrugged.

Avelar grimaced and pressed on, moving to a discussion group he founded to counter an atmosphere of racial tension that engulfed Carlmont when the school district began to desegregate (the result of a settlement agreement in a suit brought by parents in 1976). More recently, in 1991, a student was jumped at a dance, and, two weeks later, opposing demonstrations on the Persian Gulf war clashed and developed into what has gone down in Carlmont lore as The Riot. Then, the school board recruited a new principal, specially picked from east San Jose for his presumed cultural sensitivity. (This hasn't kept him from frowning on multicultural curricula and responding to EPA teens' complaints of discrimination with such oblique doublespeak as, "There's a difference between racial issues and sensitivity," and, simply and with no further explanation, "This is paradise. It

is a really neat high school. It really is paradise.")

Avelar's multicultural discussion group is voluntary, which didn't discourage four Latinas, one African American girl, one white girl, two black boys, two Latinos and one Samoan from arranging plastics seats in the cafeteria for frank talk of race the day I visited.

"Personally," began one girl, Michiné, about the bus ride to school, "I don't like to get up at 7am. I be tired. I'm serious. You be crowded on that bus, people don't take showers. We don't have enough buses, and there be all this conflict, people smoking cigarettes, they smoke pot. It's juvenile."

A girl with hair piled atop her head a la *Star Trek* picked up. "We were in San Carlos no more than two weeks ago, and you know they have a curfew?" she asked. "So we were just leaning on a car, and these three cops came up to us and said, 'What are you doing here?' I said, 'I'm drinking a Slurpee.' He said, 'What do you have in that drink?' I said, 'A Slurpee.'"

"Lemme see."

"No."

"Lemme see." So he's all poking the straw in it, and it's gross. I didn't even want it because he'd looked at it. So I threw it. They were gonna arrest all six of us for nothing. Then he said, 'Isn't your curfew coming up?' It was nine

o'clock, so I said, 'No, it's ten o'clock, so when it's ten I'll leave.'"

Cornelius, a tall, spindly kid in a Georgetown sweatshirt, clucked his mouth. "They do harass you," he fumed. "I drive here. When you get out of school, the cop will follow [you] all the way to the freeway, and when you get there, he'll turn around, or pull you over for nothing."

The complaints unraveled: harassment by cops, a curriculum that doesn't address a multicultural classroom, courses that focus on skills needed for college even though most EPA kids won't make it to college, swastika-wearing fellow students, the tokenism behind one-day events like MLK Day and Cinco de Mayo.

"They want us to be buddy-buddy and friends like everything is nice," another boy muttered. "And it's not."

As I prepared to leave that classroom, the group's most outspoken student, Michiné, caught me at the door. Throughout the discussion, she enumerated the many frustrations of her life with an angry, brassy, precocious irony. But now, the firebrand was a decade younger. She was all hungry eyes. "You gonna put us in your newspaper?" she asked me.

"Yeah," I told her.

"Say something," she implored. "Say we need help in East Palo Alto."



Rap Fans: A multicultural discussion group at Carlmont, where many East Palo Alto youths attend high school