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PERSONAL HISTORY LESSONS

INSTITUTE AIMS TO EXPAND STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES BY BLENDING EDUCATION WITH EMPHASIS ON PUBLIC SERVICE

By **Katherine Corcoran**
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Bryant Chen didn't know that in the late 1800s, Chinese immigrants were crucial to building California's roads and railroads, or that San Jose had four Chinatowns, two of which were burned in anti-Asian violence.

"They never mention that in the textbooks," said the Lynbrook High School senior, whose parents emigrated from Taiwan.

Verity Pang didn't know that two white auto workers, upset by Japanese competition in the 1980s, fatally beat Chinese-American Vincent Chin — and were sentenced to probation.

Bryant, Pang and 37 other students from Silicon Valley have spent the past four weeks in the Asian Pacific Leadership Institute, a summer program designed to expose young Asian-Americans to their history, their culture and the im-



A man takes voter-registration paperwork from Bryant Chen, 17, on Tuesday. The program for youths stresses the importance of public service.

portance of public service.

Many of the students, who graduate from the institute Thursday, confessed to leading "sheltered" suburban lives without knowing the struggles of their forebears. Now they speak

ebulliently about how their perspectives have changed.

"Before, when Asia Pacific Americans were involved in activism or protests, I didn't know what they were up to, I didn't know what was at stake. I thought it was kind of silly," said Pang, a San Jose State engineering student. Now, "I know and understand how activism gives you a voice, and what can happen if you don't have a voice."

The institute, known as APALI, is offered through De Anza College in Cupertino and open to high school juniors and seniors, as well as college students, from anywhere in California.

Michael Chang, former Cupertino mayor and De Anza's chair of Asian and Asian American Studies, founded the institute in 1997 to train future leaders, starting with the youth program in 1999. He plans to expand in the next two years to include programs for young professionals and elected officials.

While Asians make up about 28 percent of Santa Clara County residents, second only to whites, they make up a much smaller percentage

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of business, non-profit and government leaders.

Chang said many Asians in the area are well-educated and willing to serve their community.

"They love America and want to be part of America and the future," he said. "Our mission is to give them the training and start the dialogue with mainstream society."

In four weeks of field trips, class work and service projects, APALI students looked at local attitudes toward Asian-Americans, as well as gender issues and their own encounters with stereotypes.

"People say, 'You're so white' because I play football, and I don't get the best grades," Bryant said.

They heard from a long list of

professionals, including Assemblyman Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto; union organizer Irene Hsu; and Santa Clara County Superior Court Judge Erica

"I now know where I fit into my culture and to this society."

— DEBORAH WU, LYNBROOK HIGH SENIOR

Yew.

Tuesday, they conducted a voter-registration drive, experiencing that special repulsion afforded people who carry clipboards in shopping malls and outside grocery stores.

"I'm getting no love here," complained De Anza College student Carolyn Yeh, after failing to get even one person to stop and hear her pitch.

Although the institute's mission is to promote community involvement, students say they value most what they have learned about themselves.

Christine Tsay, a senior at Mission San Jose High School in Fremont, said she became more tolerant of others.

"Learning that our Asian culture had gone through so much suffering made me feel that I wouldn't want any other culture to go through torment either," she wrote in a journal exercise.

Deborah Wu, a Lynbrook senior, became more accepting of her heritage. "Sometimes I despised being Asian," she wrote. "... I now know where I fit into my culture and to this society. I

know that I am an Asian-American, and I am proud of it."

Chang is not surprised.

"Very few students in the class have been given the space, time and permission to explore who they are, their identity, the existential questions," he said.

Past graduates of the institute also say the lessons stick. Vincent Tayaotao, who enrolled in De Anza to become an auto mechanic, took the class in 2002 as a general education requirement, then changed his major to philosophy. He returned this session as an APALI intern and will transfer to San Diego State University in the fall.

"It changed my perspective," he said, "on what was possible."

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