

Living and Learning?

Students question theme housing and its intended goals

By Stephanie Loleng

SEVERAL YEARS ago students at UCSC's Oakes College decided to create theme housing, in order to build a sense of community. Merrill College also adopted the theme housing concept, after noting its inception by Stanford University. The creators of theme housing at UCSC felt that it would not only provide community, but allow students to learn about other cultures, promote diversity and allow students of color to feel comfortable adjusting to college life. But in recent years, students have questioned whether theme-oriented housing serves the intended purpose.

Although many of UCSC's eight colleges try to incorporate theme housing and residential life, only Oakes and Merrill have made diversity a priority. Merrill and Oakes students live in theme dorms and apartments, such as Asian and Pacific Islander, Jewish, Multicultural or Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual. Community activities center on issues or customs related to that culture.

Preceptors at both colleges say theme housing positively affects students, because it may expose them to a new culture. Student opinion, however, is divided.

While some students say they have learned a great deal about a new culture, many others say theme housing is an empty gesture the college makes to attract students of color. "I felt that it [multicultural dorm] didn't mean anything," says Diana,* a third year Merrill student. "It was basically like living in a white dorm."

Merrill's A dorm houses four theme floors: the African American hall, the Asian Pacific Islander (API) hall, the Multicultural hall and the Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual hall. The Chicano/Latino hall is in building B. Merrill also has theme apartment buildings, including the Vito Russo house.

Oakes College also offers theme housing where students can choose among an array of different dorms and apartments. Theme housing at Oakes includes the

Stephen Biko house, Casa Huerta, the Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Harvey Milk theme apartments and the Bawit-Weisel Jewish theme house among others.

Merrill College Provost, John Isbister, said Merrill got the idea of theme housing from Stanford University seven or eight years ago. According to Isbister, Stanford had actual theme houses as opposed to halls and only about half of the students living in those houses were of that particular ethnic group.

"[Theme housing] allows a group of people who are interested in a certain culture to live in that environment," said Isbister. "It's also sometimes important for students to live with people of the same cul-

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tural background in order for them to make the transition to college life."

According to Isbister, Merrill provides a forum for student discussion about the theme dorms by holding meetings and distributing questionnaires. "The main complaint is from students who think it's too restrictive," said Isbister.

According to Diana, a heated debate over theme housing arose at a Merrill Town Hall meeting last spring. College administrators initiated the meeting after a white student claimed she was not chosen as a Residential Assistant (RA) because she is white. According to the student, who accused the college of reverse racism, all the other RAs chosen were students of color.



"People [at the meeting] felt theme floors made them segregated from other parts of the college," Diana said.

Susan*, a student who lived in Oakes' Harvey Milk apartment building her first year, said she felt uncomfortable as she noticed groups of students isolating themselves. "I felt like people chose to segregate themselves into their own groups," she says.

According to Susan, theme housing brings students of color together, but it can also create problems for white students. "I [have] had some bad experiences with racism toward me for being white," she said.

Though some students may equate theme housing with segregation, most preceptors maintain that it brings people together, just as other dorms do. Glen Mimura, a former preceptor at Oakes' Casa Huerta, said theme housing provides a place for people who are interested in living in a cultural environment while addressing a variety of issues. He said Casa Huerta residents dealt with race, sexuality and other personal issues. "[Theme housing] builds community for students who don't have one," he said.

He said that for the two and one-half years he served as preceptor, 50 percent of the students living in Casa Huerta were Chicano/Latino, and most of the others were white.

Susan Kimoto, preceptor of the Asian Pacific Islander (API) theme hall at Merrill, said students request to live in the hall prior to arriving at UCSC. Although many Asian students have chosen to live in the API hall, Kimoto said college administrators do not automatically assign Asian students to those floors.

According to Mimura, students initiated the theme dorms at Oakes College. "I think that theme housing has been nothing but positive," Kimoto says. "It allows Asian American students to meet other students from other Asian cultures."

Richard Palmer, a junior of Hawaiian descent who lived in Casa Huerta, found living in a theme dorm a positive experience. "I thought that [theme housing] was a really good idea," he said. "A lot can be learned from that environment." Palmer said he does not see theme housing as segregatory and that he got a lot out of it because he learned about different cultures. "It [theme housing] is something that needs to be explored more," he said. "I've learned about a culture that's not my own."

But Timothy French, an Oakes student who lived in the Bayit-Wiesel Jewish theme dorm, said theme housing is a "meager attempt for UCSC to try to be diverse." He said he didn't learn about the culture and that about 5 to 10 percent of the students who lived in the dorm were Jewish.

Tang said she has witnessed some students' dissatisfaction with Merrill's theme housing. "Some students probably haven't had good experiences with this type of living, and are not prepared enough for it," she said.

French says he was aware of the different theme residential areas but had trouble choosing. He ended up asking a housing office staff person for help, and told her that he was white. The staff person suggested he live in Bayit-Wiesel. French said he didn't feel a sense of community, and activities were never generated that would unite all four dorms. "[Theme housing is] some superficial ideology that needs to be provided by the university to make people happy," said French.

Most preceptors believe that theme housing is an effective part of a UCSC education that benefits students. While some students express dissatisfaction with their experiences living in theme housing, it remains at certain colleges.

Tang said students have to understand that "multicultural" does not necessarily refer to ethnicity. "Students should come into the situation asking themselves what theme housing means to them," said Tang.

* names have been changed