

Gaston Middle School and its ethnic studies teacher push to overcome early trials

By Hannah
Furfaro

A collection of civil rights-era posters checker the east-facing wall of teacher Peter Beck's classroom, a montage of sorts that pays homage to Martin Luther King Jr., Maya Angelou and others.

One image of Olympic medalists Tommie Smith's and John Carlos' famous silent fist-raising salute against discrimination in 1968 has a special meaning for Beck, who teaches ethnic studies at Rutherford B. Gaston Middle School.

"That's what finally got us on the right track," he said during an interview this month. After weeks of back-talk and disrespect from some of his students, a quick history lesson about the runners' courage seemed to finally resonate with his middle schoolers' pre-teen angst.

"They kept disrupting so much every day, I finally told them, 'What does this mean? It's a fist.' "

Like when you're going to fight, he remembers one student saying. Yes, or a symbol of defiance, Beck explained.

Smith and Carlos' bold move was not unlike the way his students tested him each day, he told them. It was an "a-ha" moment, he said, and one that seemed to stem the youngsters' misbehavior.

It's been more than five months since Beck started at Gaston, the west Fresno middle school that opened in August. As the school made headlines in the run-up to its grand opening, a historic moment for many who'd waited decades for a neighborhood school, Beck came into a different, darker spotlight as the African-American and Latino studies teacher there.

Those who criticized the hiring process said it was never about Beck personally, and acknowledged his credentials and decade-long track record teaching ethnic studies at Hoover High. But there was painful belief among some that west Fresno had been snubbed of an important opportunity — to recruit an ethnic studies teacher with ties to the west Fresno community, someone with African-American or Latino roots.

Looking back on the first semester, experiences like Beck's were mirrored across all Gaston classrooms, principal Felicia Quarles Treadwell says. By virtue of being a new school, the mishmash of nearly 900 teachers and students, each with their own baggage or story to tell, wasn't the perfect picture many hoped for. As for Beck, Fresno Unified leaders say he's making powerful inroads with the students and the community where he now teaches.

A disrupted beginning

On a sunny morning in late July, a small group of concerned pastors, community and school advocates held hands in prayer outside the gates at Gaston Middle. The final touches were still being made on the silver-and-yellow building behind them, named for Fresno Unified's first African-American principal.

After nearly 40 years without its own middle school, west Fresno would finally have a place to send its children, the group said. Since Irwin Junior High closed in the late 1970s, children in the neighborhood were bused across town to Fort Miller, Tioga and other schools. Finally, those days were over.

But the people gathered for the early morning news conference were there for a different reason. The opening of the school didn't come without significant concerns, they said, most notably, the hiring of a white male teacher — Beck —

instead of someone with the cultural and ethnic background reflective of west Fresno's diverse community. It was a searing rebuke to those who expected a person of color would be hired for the job.

At the time, the Rev. Karen Crozier, one of those who attended the news conference, said she was concerned community voices were being ignored during the hiring process. Crozier declined to be interviewed for this article, but in July she said she and a few others met with the school's principals starting in March to discuss and give input in the hiring process.

The Rev. Paul McCoy of New Light for New Life Church of God, who was also at the news conference, said

he was concerned too few ethnic minorities were hired for teaching positions at Fresno schools. Teachers who reflect the background of the students they instruct helps ensure sensitivity about the topics related to race, he said then. His concerns remain, McCoy said this month.

One of Beck's mentors, the Rev. D.J. Criner of Saint Rest Baptist Church, said he understands the worries of McCoy and Crozier.

"One of the main classes people were looking forward to was African-American studies," he said. "You have individuals who are like, 'You give us this building, it's almost like you slap us in the face by giving us someone who doesn't look like us.'"

But Criner has encouraged Beck to press on in his classes, where he teaches about slavery, human rights activist Malcolm X, labor leader Cesar Chavez and others.

"You have to speak against social injustice and institutional racism, but at the same time, you have to live it," Criner said he told Beck. "What better way to teach it than live it."

School administrators say the summertime flap hasn't untethered Beck from his duties any more than the challenges each of Gaston's teachers have faced.

"It just wasn't the perfect story that oh, we have this goal and it's perfect and great. We've had struggles and we've had to be courageous and stand our ground," Quarles Treadwell said.

Struggles like frequent dress code violations and a high number of suspensions — 127 since school started. Students on probation, in fistfights, bullying each other.

"I've had a few parents, community members, I think maybe even some educators (who thought) when you go to a new clean house it just automatically stays that way ... The new building would make the children who came here perfect just by enrolling," she said. Reality is far from that image, she said.

Anytime you open a new school, Quarles Treadwell said, there will "be some bumps." The eighth-graders, who congregated at Gaston after attending seventh grade in several different middle schools, are almost tribal in the way they interact with kids from other schools.

"Are we progressing? Yes. Has it been challenging? Yes," Quarles Treadwell said, noting Gaston is quickly beginning to shape its own culture and community.

As for Beck, "a challenge that everyone else faced felt more raw for him," she said.

Breaking through

One simple goal drives the way Beck teaches his ethnic studies classes.

"I want them to leave the class standing a little bit taller. The nice thing about being in junior high is, you think you're 10 feet tall and bullet-proof already."

But some of his students stood just a little too tall those first few months.

“There were a lot of disturbances at the beginning of the year. I think it was almost like being a sub. They were just testing you to see what you’d put up with,” Beck said.

Those days are mostly over, so far as he can tell.

Even so, Beck is doing work to prove any detractors wrong.

He’s reached out to lots of community leaders — Council Member Oliver Baines, school board President Cal Johnson — to visit his classroom.

“I listen to him and I see him as being an individual who has high expectations for his students, is trying to help his students tell who they are from a historical perspective,” Johnson said.

Bob Mitchell, a longtime southwest Fresno civic leader and a retired police sergeant, is frequently in Beck’s class. This winter, he helped Beck organize a Kwanzaa celebration for his seventh- and eighth-graders.

“I think it speaks to his willingness to approach all parts of our community,” Mitchell said. “The most important aspect in all of this is our students, first and foremost. Them achieving and acquiring knowledge of their history and ancestry is more important than who presents the information.”

These are genuine moves to make inroads in west Fresno, Criner said. Along with his teaching, Beck leads Gaston’s Young Men’s Alliance, a leadership group for about 20 middle schoolers. He’s also a regular attendee at Criner’s church, Criner said.

“He has done so much in the community that people are accepting Peter as part of west Fresno now,” Criner said. “He’s a west Fresnan now, he’s been initiated.”

Creating a school

On a Wednesday afternoon in mid-January, volunteer Brian King walks Gaston’s halls during passing time with a toothpick between his lips, eying rule offenders without missing a beat.

“Go to class. Hey, get off that rail. Take that hood off,” he says in a quiet cadence that demands respect. One by one, they pick up their step, lean away from the rail, pull down a hood.

King, the founder of Fresno Street Saints, has patrolled these halls almost every day since the school opened. King and other members of the organization, which since 2002 has worked to improve health and safety in southwest Fresno neighborhoods, volunteer daily to help staff with discipline, get kids on and off campus safely and coordinate youth programs.

In a “community where there’s a lot of brokenness,” he said, Gaston represents an opportunity to build relationships. Gaston is the chance to “change the fabric of west Fresno,” he said.

“Is everybody going to like what’s going on? No. Are we still going to give 110% to make sure we see more kids graduating and more kids living safely and healthy and whole? Yes. No matter what the situation is,” he said.

But just as Gaston took years of thoughtful planning to build, forging a school community within its walls will also take work.

“Kids came in with a preconceived notion of wherever they came from. We had to build trust,” King said. “I don’t think it was whether these kids looked at Beck; it was how they looked at the whole situation.”

Contact Hannah Furfaro: hfurfaro@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6412 or [@HannahFurfaro](https://twitter.com/HannahFurfaro) on Twitter.

Copyright

© 2015 www.fresnobee.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.fresnobee.com>