

OC Execs Fight Rise in Hate Crimes

NONPROFITS: Groundswell sees uptick in local incidents

■ By KAITLIN AQUINO

Anti-hate organizations are getting more attention today due to the national and local rise in hate crimes.

In Orange County, local business execs have been supporting these types of organizations for years.

Ajit Thind, partner at Irvine-based **Rutan & Tucker LLP**, the second largest law firm based in OC, began contributing to Santa Ana-based nonprofit **Groundswell**—which researches hate-crime related activity in OC and offers anti-bias trainings—in 2018.

Bill Witte, CEO of Irvine-based real estate development firm **Related California**, and his wife, **Keiko Sakamoto**, started supporting Groundswell, previously known as the **OC Human Relations Council**, a decade earlier.

Their donations helped the nonprofit last year raise nearly \$4 million, up 50% from 2021.

Mission Viejo Hate Incident

About 10 years ago, Thind, who is South Asian, was walking with his wife in Mission



Bill Witte,
CEO
Related California



Jason Steinberg,
Managing Partner,
Kaufman Steinberg
LLP

Viejo when a passing driver called him a racial slur.

The encounter left Thind in disbelief; he'd never been called such an epithet before.

"I was dumbfounded that something like that would happen right next to where I grew up," he said.

"That was a rude awakening."

The incident took place a few years before Thind learned about Groundswell, where he



Rutan & Tucker's Ajit Thind with Groundswell CEO Alison Edwards

later joined as a board member, serving from 2018 until this year.

School Clubs

Groundswell isn't the first anti-hate organization Thind has been part of; the attorney's involvement in similar groups dates back to his high school years.

"Growing up in South OC, which hasn't always been the most diverse place, I definitely felt a bit different from the other students," Thind said.

That led him to join a club at **Capistrano Valley**

High School called **Cultures: Reuniting Youth**, which aimed to celebrate diversity and foster inclusion for people from different backgrounds.

"We wanted everybody else to know that we've got people in our community from different ethnic groups, and we should be embracing that," Thind said.

His involvement with Groundswell marked a continuation of Cultures' work.

Like Thind, **Jordon Steinberg**, managing partner at Irvine-based family law firm **Kaufman Steinberg LLP**, also did anti-hate work while he was a student.

At the now-closed **Whittier Law School**, Steinberg, who is Jewish, started **On Common Ground**, a club intended to unite the school's minority students, which he thought were scattered amongst their own cultural associations.

Its slogan was "defying ignorance, provoking thought," Steinberg said, who coined the phrase himself.

Guest speakers for **On Common Ground** included a Holocaust survivor and a former member of the neo-Nazi skinhead movement.

The former skinhead's presentation for the club covered how to prevent youth from turning to hate groups, a common path for young individuals who feel isolated due to troubled home lives.

"It was incredible to see that kind of 180 (degree) shift in someone, who then tries to help others understand the error of their ways and be a beacon for change," Steinberg said.

Anti-Defamation League

Steinberg continued his anti-hate work after law school with the **Anti-Defamation**

A look at businesspeople at play, charity



BEYOND WORK

League, the New York-based organization that collects data on hate incidents and offers anti-bias trainings. The ADL, which counts 25 regional offices, was founded in 1913 to counter antisemitism; it has since expanded its services to combat all forms of hate and extremism.

Though Steinberg joined the ADL after becoming an attorney, he had already been familiar with its services in his early teens.

Steinberg in 2013 served as the vice regional chair for the ADL's OC/Long Beach chapter for a year. Though he has stepped down from the role, he regularly donates to the organization.

Supremacist Propaganda

The ADL's recent report on hate activity revealed that California last year saw the second-highest number of antisemitic incidents in the country, following New York.

Local instances of antisemitism have persisted into this year.

In June, Huntington Beach residents near **Edison High School** found anti-Semitic and anti-LGBTQ+ flyers on their driveways. The flyers, titled "Every Single Aspect of the LGBTQ+ Movement Is Jewish" pictured various politicians, artists, members and advocates of the LGBTQ+ community with the Star of David on their foreheads.

Antisemitic harassment last year jumped 51% to 327, while incidents of vandalism rose 32% to 178. The number of assaults totaled 13 last year, more than triple the number recorded in 2020, the ADL reported.

The rise in antisemitic activity has prompted local Jewish communities to be more vigilant.

Witte's synagogue in Newport Beach installed metal detectors years prior as an added measure of protection.

"The fact that places of worship feel they have to do that" is a testament to increased hate activity from "people who are angry," Witte said.

Spikes in hate activity often correlate with instances of high-profile individuals spewing bigoted rhetoric.

"People see that as license to target those communities or to try to erase them," Groundswell CEO **Alison Edwards** told the Business Journal.



Santa Ana-based anti-hate nonprofit Groundswell holds community dialogues, provides anti-bias trainings and offers youth programming



Groundswell announced its name change from Orange County Human Relations at the nonprofit's gala in May

Local, National Hate Activity

Orange County saw 398 reported hate crimes and incidents in 2021, almost triple the number from 2017, according to the **OC Human Relations Commission (OCHRC)**, which Groundswell collects and analyzes data for.

Of the reported 398 incidents, 97 were hate crimes, which have jumped 73% since

2017.

Experts still consider the available data to be incomplete due to victims not reporting incidents because of language barriers and fear of law enforcement. Additionally, some law enforcement agencies do not record hate crimes or incidents, Edwards noted. Groundswell fills that gap with a 24/7 call center that assists with hate crime and incident reporting available in multiple lan-

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Trends in Hate

The rise in local hate activity can in part be attributed to OC's changing demographics over the past 30 years.

In three decades, the Asian population in Anaheim, for example, has nearly doubled to 17%. The city also saw its Hispanic population increase from 31% to 54%, according to census data from 1990 and last year.

Both the Asian and Hispanic populations in Fountain Valley more than doubled to 37% and nearly 17%, respectively, during that same time period.

Santa Ana since 1990 saw its Hispanic population increase roughly 19% to 77%.

Asians represent over 40% of the population in Irvine, the county's fastest-growing city.

Overall, OC's Asian population has more than doubled since 1990 to 23%. Hispanic residents in the county increased by nearly half to 34%.

Witte has witnessed these demographic changes through Related California's affordable housing developments, which span several of OC's increasingly diverse cities.

Such population shifts "create tensions," Witte said. "An organization like Groundswell helps calm them."

Youth Programming

Students in OC have reported to Groundswell that their classmates have called them racial slurs on social media. The nonprofit has additionally seen a rise in racial epithets being used on school campuses, from the elementary to the high school level.

OC made headlines four years ago when high school students from **Newport-Mesa Unified School District** threw a party and arranged red cups in the shape of a swastika. Photos of the gathering also showed attendants doing the Nazi salute.

"It was more ignorance," Witte said of the episode, as many students expressed remorse after being educated on the Holocaust, according to the LA Times.

Groundswell works to prevent such incidents by holding dialogues with middle and high school students, where they are encouraged to share their unique experiences, cultural traditions and family history.

"They get to talk to each other and share their perspectives, but they're not allowed to interrupt," Edwards said. "We don't tell them what's right or wrong outside the limits of just listening and being respectful."

Students have appreciated the dialogues since they provide a space to not only learn about their peers, but speak freely, "knowing that no one was going to try to prove them

Groundswell



- **FOUNDED:** 1991
- **HEADQUARTERS:** Santa Ana
- **CEO:** Alison Edwards
- **BUSINESS:** anti-hate nonprofit that provides anti-bias trainings, community dialogues
- **NOTABLE:** Group formerly known as OC Human Relations receives donations from OC execs Ajit Thind, Bill Witte and Jordon Steinberg

wrong," Edwards said.

Another youth program organized by Groundswell is its **Walk in My Shoes Youth Conference**, where hundreds of middle and high school students from OC attend workshops led by their peers to help them explore issues of identity and culture, develop leadership skills and learn about youth activism.

"They're able to interact with kids that they've never met before and may have their own stereotypes about, and then develop lifelong friendships," Thind said. "It's so inspiring to see the kids who really do all the grunt work of organizing presentations and putting this event." ■