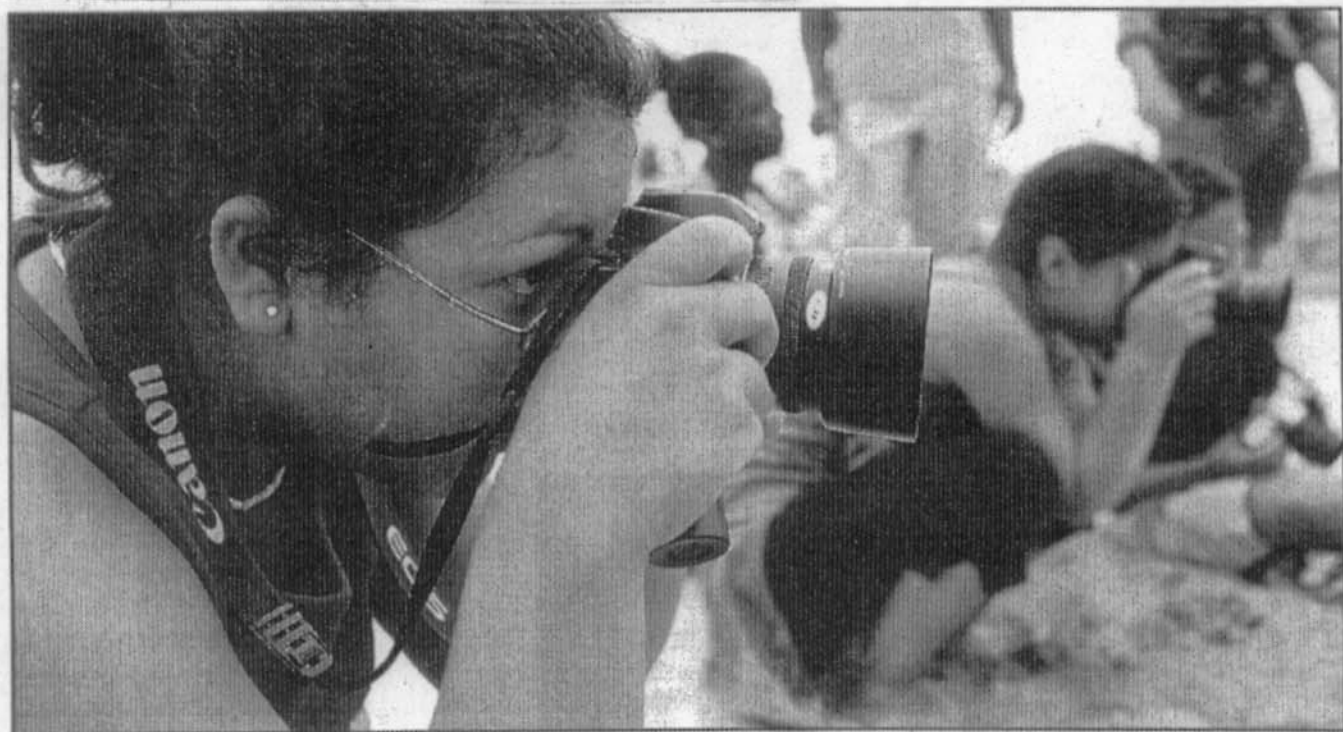


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MICHAEL TERCHA / Los Angeles Times

Los Angeles student Delisa Alejandre practices taking pictures at Venice Beach before she and four other young people travel to a world racism conference in South Africa.

Students Go to U.N. Meeting

Racism: Five young people will attend conference in South Africa, and return to lead school discussions.

By OSCAR JOHNSON
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Five Los Angeles students—with cameras in hand—on Monday departed for Durban, South Africa, to bring a United Nations conference on racism into focus for other youths.

Selena Vargas, 16, Michael Linarte, 10, Delisa Alejandre, 12, Eamon Wright, 12, and Justin Hill, 16, will join young people from around the globe at the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance.

"It's about being able to ask someone about racism," said Michael, a fifth-grader at Coeur D'Alene Elementary School.

Delisa, a St. Anne's School seventh-grader, agreed. "I'm going to get an education to open my eyes," she said. "It's going to be a great experience."

Venice Arts Mecca, a city-funded West Los Angeles group that teaches youths self-

expression through the arts, prepared the five young people for the two-week trip.

A youth summit Sunday and Monday will precede a gathering from Aug. 31 to Sept. 7 of government representatives from around the world who will develop a plan to find ways to assess and stop racism.

The Bush administration has threatened to boycott the summit because of proposals calling for compensation for past race-based atrocities and equating Zionism with racism.

At a news conference Wednesday, South African Consul-General Albert van Rensburg said that participants have agreed to strike the clause on Zionism. But U.S. officials have not announced if they will attend.

"It's a big loss on our part if [the government] is not sending anybody," Justin said later.

For him, he added, the conference is bigger than any one issue. "I'm going to get feedback so I can deal with racism at home and there."

That's what Joe Hicks, executive director of the Los Angeles City Human Relations Commission, is hoping for. The commission is funding the trip. After the five students return on Sept. 4, they will lead discussions at el-

ementary and high schools.

"We want you to come back and have an impact on others because of your trip," Hicks told the delegation at Wednesday's meeting.

Photo and video projects will be used to launch discussions and will be displayed at the Capitol in Sacramento and included in a book, said Jim Hubbard, creative director for Venice Arts Mecca.

Despite their ages, most of the five said they already have experienced racial prejudice.

For Selena, a Latina who said most of her friends are African American, it's in the form of a recurring question: "People tell me 'Why do you hang around with them? You should hang with your own kind.'"

The five will also take a U.N.-sponsored tour to examine environmental issues in poor communities. The group will visit a traditional Zulu village, and work with young photographers in the township of Kwa Mashu.

Hubbard said there will be time for fun too: an overnight stay at a game reserve and a safari.

"What I'm looking forward to the most is the animals—leopards, lions, cheetahs and gazelles," said Eamon, who has already seen wildlife in Thailand and Mexico.