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SPEAKING UP FOR THE SILENT

Thai American activist is using El Monte sweatshop scandal to publicize the problems many of her countrymen face in U.S.

■ HEARTS OF THE CITY:
Exploring attitudes and issues behind the news.

By PETER HONG
TIMES STAFF WRITER

The discovery this month of an El Monte sweatshop in which Thai workers were allegedly held against their will also led to the discovery of Chanchanit Martorell, the Thai American activist whose calm and clear voice has explained the shocking details of the workers' plight to television, radio and newspaper reporters from throughout the world.

Now that the media storm over the 72 El Monte workers has quieted, the founder of the Thai Community Development Center hopes to turn the public's attention to the thousands of poor Thai immigrants who struggle unnoticed as low-wage workers in Los Angeles restaurants and garment factories.

It was the overlooked struggles of those workers that prompted Bangkok-born and Los Angeles-raised Martorell to found the Thai Community Development Center in April, 1994. With the exception of fashionable restaurants, "Thais are basically invisible," she said.

"People know more about Thai food than they know about Thai people. They ought to understand that it's so cheap because the workers often get less than the minimum wage."

Thais are ignored, Martorell said, because their immigration to the United States is fairly recent, beginning with students and professionals in the 1960s, and escalating with an influx of laborers in the 1980s. Thais are also a relatively small group: The 1990 census counted only 19,000 in Los Angeles County.

Martorell's position as a leading advocate for Thais in Los Angeles, despite being just 27, reflects the community's short history. In fact, Martorell has helped to define the local Thai community.

While a graduate student in urban planning at UCLA, "Chancee," as she is called by friends, conducted a survey in 1992 of the local Thai community with help from nine Thai undergraduate volunteers that is now used by social service groups and academics who need demographic information on the community. For the last three years, she has also taught the only course at UCLA on Thais in the United States.

After coming to the United States at age 4, Martorell grew up near the Westlake neighborhood, just west of Downtown, where she works. She attended city schools as her family moved between apartments in Koreatown, Westlake and Pico-Union.

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Martorell's social consciousness was awakened, she said, when she was bused to high school in the San Fernando Valley, where she got a firsthand look at the differences between the lives of her rich schoolmates and poor neighbors.

"There were kids who drove to school in Jaguars. I couldn't believe how people there took what they had for granted and were so indifferent to those in the city," she recalled.

Her first taste of politics came when she served on a city youth advisory

group in her last year of high school, where she met fellow student Esteban Martorell, whom she would marry nine years later.

Throughout college at UCLA, where she studied political science, Martorell worked on political campaigns, including Tom Bradley's 1986 run for governor and Mark Ridley-Thomas' failed try for the school board in 1987. She also spent a year in Thailand, where she improved her Thai language skills.

After college, she worked for a year in the Westside district office of then-Rep. Mel Levine before starting graduate school.

Martorell started the Thai Community Development Center because she believed a social services agency would give her more direct contact with those in need of help than a politician's office would. She has scraped together enough government and private grants to pay herself a \$13,000 annual salary and hire two part-time staffers. They work out of office space donated by Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates, a nonprofit labor group, in the Westlake district.

In its first two years, the center has helped Thais get earthquake relief aid, taught immigrants about their basic labor rights and available benefits through classes held at the Wat Thai Buddhist temple in North Hollywood, and sent Thai youths to summer camp.

Lately, finding housing, food and jobs for the workers released from the El Monte sweatshop has been the center's main task.

The phone in the once-quiet office now rings constantly with calls from reporters and those who want to help the El Monte workers. Martorell hopes that the interest will remain after the shock from the El Monte raid wears off.

"The El Monte sweatshop wasn't an accident," she said. "It's just an extreme example of what immigrants put up with every day."

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The Beat Today's centerpiece is a profile

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of a young activist who has been at the vortex of the scandal involving Thai workers allegedly held against their will in a sweatshop.

To offer housing, food or jobs to the released workers, call:

Thai Community Development Center, (213) 739-8455.

Photo:

COLOR, Chanchanit Martorell, founder of the Thai Community Development Center, talks to several of the workers from El Monte sweatshop.

Photographer:

TODD BIGELOW / For The Times

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