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Raising voices against hate and intolerance

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Avi Benlolo, president and CEO of Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies highlights the importance of the Tour for Humanity initiative. Regional Chair Roger Anderson also spoke about the importance of rising against hate and intolerance.

By Lindsey Cole/The Oshawa Express

Fred Leitner stands outside the Tour for Humanity bus at Durham Region headquarters. A small crowd of Region politicians and staff has gathered to hear his story and find out what the bus is all about.

Leitner's parents are Holocaust survivors.

"My mother lost her parents, five brothers and sisters," he says, adding there were several other relatives who died as well. "My mother never overcame the guilt that she survived. Their crime was that they were Jews."

Leitner, a member of the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies board of governors, as well as a donor, says he decided to come on board the Tour for Humanity bus in order to teach people about the effects of hate and intolerance. Throughout history there have been many examples, he adds.

“I’m interested in (discussing) genocide. Genocide is a universal experience,” he explains. “I wish there had never been a Holocaust, or a Rwanda, Bosnia or Darfur. I wish we didn’t need a mobile tolerance training centre.”

The Tour for Humanity is a 30-seat, wheelchair accessible, technologically advanced mobile classroom that presents information with the hope of inspiring people of all ages and backgrounds to raise their voices against intolerance.

“We’ve been circulating around the province. This thing is rolling on a daily basis,” says Avi Benlolo, president and CEO of Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies. “This is a narrative – how we can be a better community. It’s an opportunity for us to open this dialogue.”

The bus provides education on historical events, and focuses on how these events are relevant to both Canadian and global perspectives. Coined a mobile classroom on wheels, it addresses issues of human rights and social justice.

“The Tour for Humanity actually approached the Region,” says Sonya Hardman, who works at the Region and is chair of a diversity task force. “Our goal is to highlight the importance of diversity. This is really quite a unique initiative for the province.”

There are two difference presentations on the tour. One focuses on historical events in Canada like the history of Aboriginal Residential schools and the treatment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. The second focuses on the Holocaust, universal genocide and real-world heroes like Martin Luther King Jr., Helen Keller, Simon Wiesenthal and Ghandi.

While it was at the Region to educate staff, the bus can be used at schools too, accommodating up to six classes or up to 180 students per day.

Regional Chair Roger Anderson spoke at the Region event, highlighting the fact Durham should be a “safe, caring and inclusive society” where people can “meet, learn and respect each other.”

“We need to understand our cultural differences. A global workforce is absolutely essential,” he says. “We (Canadians) do not have a perfect record by any means. There are sad examples in Canada’s past. We can certainly learn from the past.”

For more information about the bus, visit www.tourforhumanity.com.