

## High-tech bus promotes tolerance

September 19 2013



**Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center president and CEO Avi Benlolo, left, Ontario Progressive Conservative Leader Tim Hudak and NDP Leader Andrea Horwath, visit the new Tour for Humanity bus.**

**TORONTO** — The Tour for Humanity, an ambitious project that can be compared to no other, will help the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies (FSWC) bring its message of tolerance, inclusivity, justice and human rights to millions of Ontarians.

A “mobile tolerance education centre,” The Tour for Humanity, is a \$1-million, retrofitted, 42-foot Fleetwood bus that has been re-engineered to accommodate a 32-seat theatre.

This initiative, for which FSWC has raised \$2.4 million, is designed to bring its educational programs beyond the Greater Toronto Area to the entire province of Ontario.

FSWC president and CEO Avi Benlolo said that while his organization offers classes about tolerance and social justice issues at their Yonge Street offices, there are many people living outside of Toronto to whom the classes aren’t accessible.

“We thought about building a museum in the hope that people would come. Drawing people from outlying areas is a difficult problem,” Benlolo said, adding that small Ontario communities including Stratford, St. Jacobs, Orangeville and Dundas are underserved when it comes to programming that promotes tolerance and inclusivity.

“The question was, how can we really project our influence much further and get to more people? The answer seemed quite clear: we take our program to them.”

The Tour for Humanity will travel from town to town to offer workshops for students, educators and law enforcement representatives on topics including the Holocaust, genocide, bullying, heroes and leadership.

“There is no mobile training centre like this anywhere else,” Benlolo boasted. “We completely retrofitted and re-engineered most of it.”

The mobile centre features an interactive film that will sync up with iPads. There will be a question and answer component in which students will be prompted to answer questions on the iPads and a program will tabulate their responses.

“We also built in a lift to make it wheel-chair accessible because we’re all about inclusivity. The first person to have used the lift is the lieutenant-governor of Ontario, David Onley.”

Onley – along with Ontario PC Leader Tim Hudak, NDP Leader Andrea Horwath, and Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne – was on hand earlier this month to launch the initiative with a ribbon-cutting ceremony.

Onley applauded FSWC for developing a community outreach project that can both educate and inspire.

“That’s when learning is most effective – when it illuminates and guides who we are... It can change lives,” he said.

Benlolo said that although more than \$2 million has already been raised, FSWC will continue to raise funds to sustain the project for years to come.

“We’ve had an incredible amount of people who have pledged to finance it,” he said, adding that the Ontario Trillium Foundation gave FSWC a \$500,000 grant, with the rest of the funds coming from private donors.

“They love the idea and they are helping.”

FSWC board of governors member Dorothy Shoichet, whose family donated funds to realize this ambitious project, said it’s the most creative educational tool she’s ever seen.

“It is an exciting opportunity to get to young minds before they become corrupted by myth and rumour... I’m convinced it’s going to change the world – first Ontario, and then the world,” Shoichet said.

She predicted that once people learn about this initiative, other organizations will want to follow suit, and she also anticipates that when more funds become available, FSWC will buy and retrofit more buses to give the project a wider reach.

Shoichet, who called her first time on the bus a thrilling, “life-changing experience,” said that for this initiative, the possibilities are endless.

“It’s the beginning of the end of racism. I don’t make that statement carelessly. It’s the end of racism and anti-Semitism, first in Ontario, then in Canada, then North America and hopefully the world.”

Benlolo said sensitivity training is very much needed, considering the prevalence of bullying and incidents such as the one that involved students at Saint Mary’s University in Halifax who were caught on tape singing a chant that promoted non-consensual sex with underage girls earlier this month.

“Communities want these kinds of programs to respond to these incidents.”

Benlolo expects that the bus will make its first trip in October. Those who would like to see the bus can come to Dundas Square on Sept. 25 for FSWC’s annual Freedom Day celebration, where the mobile tolerance centre will be parked.