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Tour for Humanity bus exposes Guelph kids to hate and hope



Stark images of the Nazi death camps are presented in the Tour for Humanity bus, a mobile education centre that visited Willow Road Public School Thursday. Rob O'Flanagan/Guelph Mercury

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By Rob O'Flanagan

GUELPH—The story of humanity's inhumanity pulled into a Guelph elementary school parking lot on Thursday.

The state-of-the-art Tour for Humanity bus, a creation of the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies, gave students at Willow Road Public School a stark and startling glimpse into the historic and present day ravages of hatred and prejudice.

But woven into the lessons of barbarism and cruelty were examples of how to go about making the world a kinder and less violent place. The message delivered is ultimately one of hope.

Simon Wiesenthal is remembered as the world's greatest Nazi hunter. A survivor of a Nazi concentration camp he was responsible for bringing about 1,000 Nazi war criminals to trial after the Second World War.

A champion of justice and not a proponent of revenge, Wiesenthal believed the whole of humanity suffered a grave indignity during the war. He vowed to work to ensure genocide never again happened, Daniella Lurion, an education associate with Tour for Humanity, told reporters.

The 440 square foot tour bus features 30 comfortable folding seats that face a broad screen. Narrated visual presentations explore the reality of genocide, hatred and prejudice, exposing the falsehoods that foment hatred and the principles and actions that foster peace, compassion, and diversity. Different age groups view different presentations, some being too unsettling for younger children.

"Every presentation ends with a message of hope," said Lurion. Students are encouraged to "go forth and do something about it."

Fellow education associate Danny Berman said one of the more alarming pieces of information offered during one of the presentation is that 60 per cent of hate crime today is committed by youth between the ages of 12 and 24. Hate crimes against religious groups are on the rise around the world.

Young people are exposed to vast quantities of hate material online. It is a part of their lives, and has an influence on their behaviour.

While information on the reality of the Holocaust has been widely disseminated for over 60 years, young people may be learning about it for the first time, Berman said. It is vital to continue to tell the story to younger generations so it is not forgotten, and so that lessons are learned from it about what can happen when hatred goes unchecked.

"Learning from history and building on it can prevent this from happening in the future," he said.

"The response to it has been overwhelmingly positive, in the sense that they've never seen all of this graphic footage before, and I think it hits them really hard that these things actually existed," Berman said of student reaction to the material shown on the bus.

He said the catastrophe of the Holocaust, and the magnitude of it seems unbelievable until actual historical images and footage depict it and makes it hit home.

The presentations connect historical events to contemporary conditions, and explore examples of intolerance and prejudice that have left a shameful mark on Canadian history. The reality of Japanese internment camps, the Chinese head tax, and the treatment of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, are all explored.

The contemporary incarnation of hatred in the form of cyber-bullying is an area of particular immediacy to school-aged children, Berman said.

"Although the magnitude of the Holocaust is different from today's cyber-bullying, we show how they are connected – how little glimpses of hate can build up," he said. "The Holocaust didn't happen in a vacuum. It built up over a long period of persecution."

Steve Viveiros is principal of Willow Road Public School. The Tour for Humanity, he said, serves a valuable educational purpose.

"The magnitude of the Holocaust speaks to how much hatred an individual can have," he said. "And these kids still see it today. Hatred still exists."

The bus, he added, not only presents the stark reality of the brutal consequences of hatred, but instills messages of hope.

"My hope would be that they look at this and think that hatred does exist, it may exist in my home or in my community, and I want to do something about it," he said. "That is our goal – to help educate students about change."