

Hate crimes focus of town hall meeting at Jewish community center

By Jack Rubinger
The Southwest Portland Post

We're living in crazy, paranoid times. Events that seemed unlikely are becoming more commonplace. Are we alone in our feelings?

Is President Donald Trump at the root of much of the negativity and cruelty that's happening locally, nationally, globally?

A recent town hall meeting at Mittleman Jewish Community Center, which featured an all-star panel of politicians, counselors, academics, religious leaders and law enforcement officials, did much to alleviate concerns and offer some relief through dialogue, discussion, discourse.

The center itself was the site of a bomb threat in March.

The meeting was timely for a variety of reasons — a global increase in hate crimes, several bomb threats at Jewish community centers, increased media attention on hate and hate crimes and an uptick in anti-Semitic graffiti.

The New York Times has launched "This Week in Hate," a column devoted to the topic.

The mood at the meeting was hopeful and cautiously optimistic. It wasn't loud. It wasn't rowdy. It wasn't a protest. It was a gathering created to encourage listening and learning.

Most everyone on the panel agreed that changes picked up speed in the weeks before and after the presidential election and that "haters" are feeling more emboldened.

For some on the panel, including Rabbi David Kosak from Congregation Nevah Shalom, David Molko, a counselor from Jewish Child and Family Service, and Professor Steve Wasserstrom from Reed College, there's a growing sense of "here we go again."

According to Wasserstrom, "Hate crimes aren't new, but they seemed to go away after 9-11. "Now, it's coming out of the woodwork since the presidential election."

Acknowledging that children may be more vulnerable and frightened was the focus of remarks from Douglass Ruth of Jewish Child and Family Services.

Ruth talked about how to talk to children from a "Trauma Informed Approach" to create a sense of safety. He encouraged kids to ask questions and stressed that adults don't always have the answers.

"Many groups feel targeted," said City Commissioner Nick Fish. "My advice: form alliances and coalitions with local groups who share common values like Muslims and the LGBT community. We must continue to have gatherings like this," said Fish.

The law enforcement community was represented by the FBI, Portland police and the State of Oregon Attorney General's office.

"We have the commitment of the department to pursue investigations," said Bill Williams, the United States Attorney for the District of Oregon.

Scott Goldman from the FBI concurred, saying that hate crimes were a priority for his bureau. "There's a new sense of urgency," said Goldman. "People are feeling emboldened."

Once the panelists offered their perspectives, the floor was opened up to community members in attendance who expressed concern, gratitude and hopefulness. About 100 people attended the meeting.

"We are in a unique situation in Oregon," said one audience member, looking for guidance from representatives of U.S. senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley.

"Our challenge for those of us

who want to be activist outside of Oregon is to broaden our reach. What can we do to make a difference in our country?"

The Senators' representatives freely shared their business cards and encouraged community members to contact them directly to learn more about what we all can do to make a difference outside of Oregon.

Reporter's Note: The U.S. Senate was in session and both Wyden and Merkley were in Washington, D.C. Merkley was leading a filibuster protesting Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch at the time of the town meeting in Portland.

This writer was impressed by the Rabbi Kosak's passion, deep knowledge of the issues, and comfort in sharing his own personal experience with frightening incidents.

Kosak offered both spiritual and community approaches as he talked about resilience, fear, hatred, friendship, and carving time to make new friends.

"What we know is that when people encounter someone from a



An all-star panel of local officials was featured at a town hall meeting on hate crimes at Mittleman Jewish Community Center in April. (Post photo by Jack Rubinger)

minority group and have a positive experience then they are less likely to harbor hatred," said Kosak. "We can indeed make a positive impact before the hate begins."

One resident brought up a recent graffiti incident at Grant High School. Commissioner Fish offered his perspective on the incident.

"It's my view that we must act very quickly to remove the graffiti," said Fish. It cannot be allowed to stand. I share your concerns about graffiti."

Fish went on to say, "I urge you to reach out to (Portland Mayor) Ted Wheeler and my colleagues to tell them why this is important because this is a line item in the budget and your feedback will have an impact on decisions that are made."

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