

IN HER OWN WORDS: CONFRONTING CHARLOTTESVILLE

By Elissa Buxbaum, Director, Campus Affairs, ADL

Sarah Kenny was Student Council president at the University of Virginia when the alt-right rallied at her school's Charlottesville campus. She hadn't yet returned to campus when a tiki-torch-wielding crowd of neo-Nazis and white supremacists marched through the white columns of the UVA Rotunda, spouting anti-Semitic and racist vitriol.

"I had seen something on Twitter the night before, and when I woke up the next morning, mayhem had descended," she said. "It was a surreal experience, watching TV and seeing people punching each other on the streets I was so familiar with."



Sarah spent the days that followed on the phone, trying to figure out how to respond in the aftermath, navigating the media, and thinking about what she could do to prepare students returning to campus—especially new students. She rewrote her welcome address to the first-year class.

She didn't have a playbook—she figured it out as she went along, organizing town hall meetings and fostering conversations among stakeholders. One of her biggest challenges, she said, was bringing the campus together without forcing a narrative of unity. She signed on in support of a list of action items that students of color presented to the president of the university, including removing Confederate plaques from the rotunda. In the spring, she convened a round table to update the student body. "Emotions were still very raw," she said.

Throughout the year, Sarah heard from other student leaders whose campuses were both targeted by white supremacist propaganda and inundated with peer-to-peer incidents of bias and hate. In November, Sarah organized student government leaders across the country to sign a statement of solidarity, rejecting hate and calling on public officials to address white supremacy. She connected with other student leaders across the country through the National Campus Leadership Council. With the "challenges of a lonely job," Sarah says, "Andy MacCracken, the Executive Director, and the NCLC community provided comfort and advice through a number of trying situations as Student Council president."

It is critical that we build community, create resources and share best practices for preventing and responding to hate incidents. ADL has partnered with NCLC to provide workshops for student government presidents nation-wide, building leadership skills for working closely with administrators and other partners on their campus to both build inclusive communities and combat bias and hate.

In response to Charlottesville and the rise in hate incidents on campuses across the country, ADL also created a guide for college and university administrators. It's called Hate/Uncycled.

Using the five-part Hate/Uncycled model, ADL partners with campuses to help them prevent and respond to hate:

- Prevent: Keep hate incidents from happening by nurturing inclusive campus communities.
- Prepare: Create and update campus response policies, teams, and plans.
- Respond: Act swiftly and effectively when hate incidents do occur.
- Heal: Bring people together in a thoughtful healing process after the dust settles.
- Educate: Interrupt cycles of hate and bias using educational tools.

All members of a campus community that value diversity, inclusion, equity, and belonging can have an impact on the cycle of bias and hate at many different points. The process engages everyone from administration and student leaders to student affairs units, academic departments and human resources divisions. When school communities come together to create a foundation of trust and respect, they are more resilient to the occasional instance of hate speech. Disrupting society's systems of inequity and bias is no easy task. Acts of outright hatred are easy to spot, but the work toward true inclusion does not stop at speaking out against overt expressions of hate.

A year after Charlottesville, Sarah's advice to student leaders facing similar situations is to focus on building coalitions. "Engage students in creating the environment they want on their campus."

PROFILE OF SIAVOSH DERAKHTI



Siavosh Derakhti (Sy-av-osh Der-ARK-tee) is a Swedish Muslim. At an early age, he emigrated from Iran to Sweden with his parents when his country was at war with Iraq. Siavosh first became aware of prejudice as a young boy. His two best friends were David, a Jew, and Juliano, a Roma. They bonded because they all felt as members of minority groups that they were excluded in their own country. The Muslim children in school used to bully David saying “Sieg Heil,” “Dirty Jew,” and “Jews to the gas.” Siavosh became David’s bodyguard and defended him when fights would break out.

Later, as a teenager, Siavosh’s father took him to Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz-Birkenau (concentration and extermination camps operated by the Nazis during World War II). Siavosh was deeply moved by these experiences and thought that such a trip could be the catalyst to open up a dialogue with his peers in Sweden. He worked with his school

to organize a trip for 27 students to Auschwitz, where many of his classmates wept in response to what they learned.

When he was nineteen, Siavosh founded Young Muslims Against Anti-Semitism, now known as Young People Against Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia. The organization brings together people from different backgrounds to combat prejudice and exclusion, build bridges among people, and create young role models. This is accomplished through school visits, dialogues, workshops, and study trips to concentration camps for politicians and business leaders as well as students. “Our first trip to Krakow and Auschwitz-Birkenau was in 2011,” recalls Siavosh. “Today we still do education trips to Auschwitz-Birkenau with youth and young adults from Malmo [Sweden] to educate the future generation.”

Siavosh was given the opportunity to meet with U.S. President Barack Obama during a state visit to Sweden, and was later invited to Washington, D.C. to meet with members of the Obama administration. He has been recognized with many awards for his efforts, including the Swedish Committee Against Antisemitism’s first ELSA award and Sweden’s Raoul Wallenberg Award. (Wallenberg was a Swedish diplomat and humanitarian remembered for saving the lives of tens of thousands of Jews in Hungary during the Holocaust.)

Despite threats from fellow Muslims, Siavosh continues his work as a leader, mentor, and motivational speaker on issues related to diversity and intolerance. His organization now visits synagogues, mosques and churches, and invites imams and rabbis to speak. “Too many young people,” says Siavosh, “have lost faith in society and that someone cares...We show that people can stand united against racism and xenophobia regardless of religion, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation.”

PROFILE OF TALI SHORR

When the community of Reading, Massachusetts was targeted by a series of antisemitic and other bias-related incidents, 17-year-old Tali Shorr knew she needed to speak up.



In October of 2018 two swastikas were found etched in pencil on the leg of a science lab bench at Reading Memorial High School. An anti-LGBTQ message was found in a bathroom stall the same month. Earlier in the year a student reported that “Gas the Jews” was written in the town’s middle school lobby. Furniture at the local library had also been defaced by a Nazi symbol. In a letter to the community, high school Principal Kathleen M. Boynton wrote, “The swastika symbolizes hate and antisemitism and there is no place for these types of hateful actions or behaviors in our

schools or in the greater Reading community.” The school responded by hosting speakers on antisemitism and the Holocaust and a public art project focused on embracing differences.

Tali Shorr was moved to do more when—after swastikas appeared as graffiti—her peers derisively told her she should learn how to take a joke. “How is the death of 6 million of my people a joke?” she challenged. “Hearing these kinds of things said just makes me feel like I don’t have any support in my community, makes me feel unsafe in my community at school, and it also makes me feel kind of scared.”

Tali spoke about her experience as a Jewish student confronting the Nazi symbol at many public meetings and at a rally against antisemitism on the Town Common that brought together hundreds of community members. She also wrote about her experiences in a piece entitled “I Stood Up,” which won first prize in a Holocaust essay contest focused on what it means to be a “witness” in the face of acts of antisemitism and hatred.

“As [I talked to my principal and guidance counselor], I realized that I was speaking about the Jewish people in a way that was very personal. For example, instead of saying ‘Six Million were killed in the Holocaust,’ I said, ‘Six Million of us.’ Although I wasn’t there personally, I felt connected to the tragedy in a way that I had never before. I became a witness.”

“I began attending numerous meetings and speaking out publicly. Slowly, I became more comfortable speaking up. My experience allowed me to form relationships with important adults in town, who took my concerns seriously. Because I stood up, tangible change happened in my community.”

“At this point, I’m less concerned with telling people not to draw swastikas than with urging others to speak out against acts of hate, and teaching them about the hurtful and destructive effects swastikas have on people. My whole experience has brought me so much closer to my Jewish identity, culture, and community. I stood up. I stood up for myself, my people, my community. From now on, I will not hesitate to continue fighting for what I believe in.”

Sources: Reading Public Schools (2019, May 26). RMHS Senior Wins Prestigious Holocaust Essay Contest *Pathways*, 10(32), 2-3, retrieved [here](#); Guerra, Cristela (2018, October 21). After swastika incidents, Reading residents rally against anti-Semitism. *Boston Globe*, retrieved from [bostonglobe.com](#).

PROFILE OF ARIELLE ZOKEN

In October 2018—following the High Holy Days that mark the Jewish New Year—the University of California, Davis campus was blanketed with antisemitic flyers.

Distributed by the white supremacist group, the Daily Stormer, the flyers displayed stereotypical depictions of Jewish people and falsely blamed them for organizing attacks on Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, who had been accused of harassing a former classmate.

Arielle Zoken, an economics major and Jewish Studies minor at UC Davis, was understandably troubled. This was not her first experience of antisemitism. “There’s a student in my religious studies class,” shared Arielle, “who asked where my horns were...I’ve had professors say not great things about Jews and money and making the stereotype and reinforcing it. [Once] I was speaking Hebrew on the phone with my mom, and this girl...asked if I was speaking ‘terrorist.’”

Arielle felt compelled to act. She was active in Chabad, an Orthodox Jewish community on campus, the Jewish sorority Sigma Alpha Epsilon Pi, and other groups devoted to social justice. She felt a personal responsibility to create an environment in which Jewish and other students could feel comfortable speaking up against discrimination.



The first thing Arielle did was report the antisemitic flyers to a national civil rights organization and create a public Facebook post to notify the Jewish community. Though the school administration immediately removed the flyers, word got out and many students were shaken by the incident. Arielle worked with over ten student groups and a local synagogue to organize a letter to the school Chancellor. They advocated for an email communication to students, a town hall meeting with campus officials, training sessions on antisemitism, and improved mental health services to help students cope with hate incidents. Arielle and other Jewish student leaders were invited to a meeting with the Chancellor to plan for some of these actions.

While some positive changes followed, there were also setbacks. A student government committee responsible for supporting minority communities organized an event in response to the flyers, but did not include Jewish student groups. Some student organizations criticized and blocked the Jewish civil rights organization selected to conduct trainings on antisemitism. And they pushed back against resolutions defining antisemitism and condemning the flyers, arguing that antisemitism shouldn’t be singled out when many forms of religious discrimination exist. When one student senate member declared that “The needs of Jewish students have been prioritized on this campus for far too long,” many Jewish students were deeply hurt and some left the meeting in tears.

Arielle was distressed not just by the expressions of antisemitism, but by the absence of unity among her peers. She had always tried to model social harmony, for example by working with the Muslim Student Association to secure kosher and halal food on campus and attending a prayer service following the 2019 massacre at two mosques in New Zealand.

Despite the challenges, Arielle and her peers persisted by conducting a student leader training on antisemitism, writing an Op-ed on antisemitism for the student newspaper, and organizing vigils in response to the synagogue shootings in Pittsburgh, PA and Poway, CA. Arielle has learned important lessons from her activism, such as finding common ground with others, sharing personal stories, and opening up dialogue even in the face of hurtful rhetoric. She emphasizes the need for education so we can better understand the perspectives and needs of others, and for representation of diverse groups in student government and other campus leadership activities.

A year after the Daily Stormer flyers appeared on campus, more flyers emerged from the American Identity Movement, another white supremacist group. This has strengthened Arielle's resolve to keep on fighting. "...We need to make sure that there are actions in place," she emphasizes, "that Jewish students feel comfortable even voicing the fact that this isn't okay...Part of the reason we're making such a push here is because we want to set an example in the future [that] it's okay to speak up when these things happen. It's okay to say, 'I'm being discriminated against and I want my voice to be heard.'"

Sources: Habchi, Sabrina (2019, January 11). Following anti-Semitic incident, plans to host workshops, town hall still on hold. The California Aggie. Retrieved at theaggie.org. Zoken, Arielle (2019, March 13). Guest: UC Davis must involve Jewish students in conversations about anti-Semitism on our campus. The California Aggie. Retrieved at theaggie.org.