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Kids open up on targeting of Jewish students

BY STEPHEN BUTTRY

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

In the heartland of America in the 21st Century, anti-Semitism often seems like a form of bigotry from a distant time or place.

Unless you're a Jewish kid.

In the hallways, playgrounds and locker rooms of Midlands schools, Jewish students hear taunts and slurs with echoes of the Holocaust that so profoundly shaped the lives and outlook of their grandparents:

Christ killer! You dirty Jew! If I were Hitler, I would have finished the job!

"Our kids have heard some awful, awful things. They felt very hurt," said Rabbi Debbie Stiel of Omaha, rabbi at Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in Lincoln.

Hana Kornbluh, 14, a member of Stiel's congregation, moved to Lincoln from Vermont for the school year that finished earlier this month. She had learned about the Holocaust and the rest of her people's long history of persecution, but had never experienced anti-Semitism herself.

"It was like, that's a long time ago," she said.

On Hana's first day of eighth grade at Irving Middle School, a boy was acting obnoxious, and when he walked away another girl said, "Oh, don't mind him. He's Jewish."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Hana responded.

The classmate started to explain to her what a Jew was.

"I'm Jewish," Hana said quickly.

The offending girl backpedaled quickly, but the religious insults didn't stop.

Through the year, students who knew Hana's religion would say, "Oh, that's so Jewish!" to express scorn for behavior or comments by classmates.

One student said Jews wear yarmulkes "to hide their horns because they're straight from hell."

When parents of Jewish youths from various Lincoln-area schools learned that their children were experiencing similar treatment, Lincoln's two synagogues held a joint youth meeting with an educator from the Anti-Defamation League.

"I felt like each of these kids was like a pressure cooker and the steam had been released," Stiel said. "They all had issues they wanted to discuss."

Some of the students' experiences reflected insensitivity or ignorance on the part of teachers: a choral program with all Christian music or a teacher or coach insisting on taking a test or attending practice on a Jewish holiday.

The Anti-Defamation League deals regularly with student anti-Semitism, said regional director Bob Wolfson.

He frequently has students and parents together for a program and addresses them separately in different rooms, asking both groups whether the students have experienced anti-Semitism. Invariably, four or five times as many students as parents answer yes.

Sometimes, Wolfson said, a bully will target a Jewish youth's religion in a generic fashion, the same way a bully might torment another classmate over obesity or sexual orientation. Other times, he said, anti-Semitic bullying is "mission-oriented. It's an animus toward Jews that's real, it's targeted and usually learned."

Stiel and Wolfson said that after the release this spring of Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ," many Jewish students heard remarks blaming Jews for Jesus' crucifixion.

Teasing about faith is more personal and hurtful than other things kids tease about, Hana said.

Midlands schools have been good about working with the ADL to address bigotry, Wolfson said, and often the bullies involved did not understand the seriousness of their slurs. Some, he said, knew that Hitler references would draw a reaction and bring them attention. But the youths did not understand the history of the Holocaust and the pain their remarks caused.

"Most of the time this is kids testing limits, gaining attention and on their own journey of education," Wolfson said.

Other students, he said, have been expelled after persisting in anti-Semitic harassment.

Irving Principal Dave Van Horn said the school teaches respect for Jews and other minorities in various ways, including in social studies and reading programs.

"We talk about the value that people of different backgrounds bring to our school," he said.

Nonetheless, he said, some students harass kids from other backgrounds, usually over racial or ethnic differences. When he learned of an incident involving Hana, he talked with the offender and the student's parents and assured Hana the school would respond to any reports of anti-Semitism.

Hana's parents, Marc and Deni Kornbluh, said they were pleased with the response of Van Horn and the

guidance counselor, Lou Fredrickson.

Students read the book "Chernowitz!" by Fran Arrick about a Jewish ninth-grader who is bullied by children. Since then, Hana said, her treatment has improved, though "there's some kids who just will never get it."

Marc Kornbluh said Jewish parents in Lincoln became especially concerned about harassment of their children when they learned of the November suicide in Garretson, S.D., of 14-year-old Jessica Haffer, a Jewish girl who was born in Lincoln and still has family and friends there.

It's unclear how much, if any, anti-Semitism was involved in the bullying of Jessi.

Her parents, School Superintendent Robert Arend and English teacher Kari Stoltenberg did not know of any religious slurs from students, but Jessica had been reluctant to tell her parents about the harassment.

At the March meeting in Lincoln, Stiel "was surprised how many of the students were like, 'No, I would never tell my parents.'"

Wolfson said youths are reluctant to tell parents about bigotry on two levels: They fear more harassment, and turning to their parents "diminishes their emerging sense of independence."

ADL's education director in Omaha visits schools and synagogues, teaching Jewish students strategies for responding to harassment and teaching educators ways to prevent and respond to bigotry.

Wolfson said schools can use history lessons about the Holocaust to help students understand recent and current genocide in places such as Sudan, Bosnia and East Timor.

He said the ADL presented dozens of programs this year for schools in Nebraska, Iowa and Kansas. He estimated that about 25 percent of the time, schools seek the programs in response to specific incidents of anti-Semitism.

Most teachers, counselors and principals are responsive in addressing bigotry among students, Wolfson and Stiel said. But Stiel added, "There are some teachers in schools that clearly do not like Jewish students."

Keith and Jeri Haffer say they have filed a complaint with the South Dakota Department of Education, alleging that a Garretson teacher, Julie Mueller, discriminated against Jessi on the basis of her religion. Complaints are not public records.

The Garretson school board rejected a complaint filed locally, saying it found no basis for the charge.

In Jessi's class last spring, a girl was showing the cross necklace she had received for confirmation. Other girls showed similar necklaces, and Jessica stood up to show the Star of David necklace she received for her bat mitzvah.

According to the Haffers, Mueller told her: "Sit back down. Nobody knows about that and nobody cares."

Mueller declined a request for an interview, and Arend would not comment on the complaint.

The Haffers believe anti-Semitism was at the root of the harassment their daughter faced.

Keith Haffer said nobody in town "has said anti-Semitic things to my face." But he recalled a dispute with a teacher who said, "You people think you can do whatever you want."

"You people," Keith said. "I've heard those words before. I grew up with 'you people.'"

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