

Tour for Humanity brings its message to Peel Region

By Bill Rea

The importance of tolerance is basic to the Tour for Humanity, which the The Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies is promoting across the country.

The tour, in the form of a museum bus, stopped in Brampton recently, as part of the meeting of Peel Regional council, and it received an enthusiastic, and sometimes emotional, welcome.

It's in the form of a self-contained, technologically-advanced Tolerance Education Center, designed to address issues of human rights and social justice. The Tour was launched in November 2013 and is now in its inaugural year, travelling to schools and communities across Ontario.

Simon Wiesenthal was a Holocaust survivor who became famous after the war for his work as a Nazi hunter.

Regional Chair and CEO Emil Kolb called it a very powerful presentation, pointing out discrimination remains a universal issue.

Avi Benlolo, president and CEO of the Centre, said the tour has already visited 60 schools, as well as Parliament Hill and Queen's Park.

The basis of the message is to never let something like the Holocaust, in which some six million Jewish people and millions of others were killed by the Nazis during the war, happen again. One of the lessons, he said, is that hate remains and that intolerance can't be allowed.

Benlolo warned of the dangers of just shrugging off people who promote hatred. He reminded councillors that in his youth, Hitler was dismissed as someone who would not amount to much.

"Of course, we know what happened," he observed. "We should take anybody who speaks of hate seriously."

"It is not for civilized society," he added, pointing out Germany was considered a civilized society too. He also commented on the need to keep track of what goes on in Canada, as he cited the words of Wiesenthal: "Freedom is not a gift. We have to fight for it each and every day."

Benlolo also related a story he had heard a couple of days before, about a teacher in Paris who was walking home wearing a Jewish head covering. He was attacked and beaten up by a gang, and one of the attackers used a marker to draw a swastika on his chest. He added incidents like that go on all over the world.

"We should all be concerned about this kind of thing," he declared.

Benlolo stressed one of the aims of the tour is to start discussion about the lessons of the Holocaust. If it can be understood how it happened, it might help prevent it from being repeated. But it also talks about issues of concern in other places around the world.

It's also aimed at telling people that they can make a difference if they try.

"The world is not great," Benlolo said. "We do really bad things to one another. But how can we change that?"

Benlolo was accompanied by Holocaust survivor Joe Gottdenker, who was saved as a child by a non-Jewish family.

"We know in the glimmer of hate there is also a glimmer of hope," Benlolo said.

Mayor Marolyn Morrison was emotional as she recalled a trip she and Mississauga Councillor Pat Mullin made to the notorious Auschwitz camp and the impact it had on her.

"It's unbelievable what humanity will do to humanity," she commented.

Morrison also told of how her husband's grandfather was killed in Holland because he tried to help Jewish people get to safety, and her husband's mother was due to be killed too, but liberation came before that could happen.

She also expressed appreciation that there's an understanding things like that still go on in the world.

"It's had a real impact on me," she said, "how horrendous people can be to people."

"There's so much hatred out there," Morrison added. "There wouldn't be wars without all that hatred."

Mississauga Councillor Nando Iannicca commented that the thing he doesn't get about the Holocaust is how so many people in the world knew what was going on and said nothing.

"It was the world's collective indifference that allowed it to happen," he observed.

Mississauga Mayor Hazel McCallion was glad to see in the inclusiveness in the Centre's message. But she did say she was bothered by the continued discrimination against women. "We have it right here at home," she remarked. "What are we doing about it right here at home?"

Brampton Councillor John Sprovieri observed this all started with Cain and Abel.

"I don't believe it's ever going to go away," he observed, commenting that people from other lands bring baggage and hate with them to Canada. The only way to deal with it, he said is to clarify that previous grudges shouldn't be passed from generation to generation.

"We live in a world of differences," Sprovieri added. "We should all be open to these differences."

Mississauga Councillor Pat Saito said she's from Northern Ireland originally, and her husband is Japanese-Canadian, parents and grandparents were interred during the war. She argued that everyone can find examples in their family histories of what hatred has done.

Saito pointed to the need to help people by trying to advise them on what they can do.

"Starting with the children is good," she said.