

Program aims to end bigotry over Judaism

Students educate peers to foster understanding

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Charlie Herman was just two weeks into his freshman year of high school when another student asked him about summer camp.

But he realized it wasn't an innocent question, when the boy added, "What summer camp did you go to, Auschwitz?"

"I was appalled," Charlie said. "It shouldn't be happening."

That's one of the personal experiences he has been sharing with teenagers from other schools in the area, and the episode occurred several years before one man who was arrested after the storming of the U.S. Capitol Jan. 6 was photographed wearing a shirt that said "Camp Auschwitz" on it.

Charlie, a senior at Williamsville North High School, is part of Student to Student, a high school peer education program initiated in St. Louis more than 10 years ago. The goal is to reduce prejudice and bigotry and to foster understanding among high school students.

The Buffalo Jewish Federation

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Anti-Semitic incidents are on the rise in U.S.

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received a grant to replicate the program here.

“Every faith tradition, at least from my perspective, is about talking about love and tolerance. The more we’re able to tell people about Judaism, the more we’re able to promote the sense of love and tolerance,” said Michael Steklof, director of Jewish Experience at the Center for Jewish Engagement and Learning who runs the student program.

The program is a collaboration of the Center for Jewish Engagement and Learning, the Holocaust Resource Center and the Jewish Community Relations Council.

Steklof said most Jews have experienced small, and sometimes not so small, incidents of anti-Semitism.

“It’s definitely something that happens a lot, unfortunately,” Steklof said. “I think when people don’t understand other people, they tend to do these things. I think our hope is through presentations like this we can give people familiarity with the Jewish people to cut down on anti-Semitism.”

The number of anti-Semitic incidents in the United States has been going up in recent years, according to the Anti-Defamation League. The number in 2019 – the most recent data available – reached its highest level since the Anti-Defamation League began collecting records in 1979. There were more than 2,100 incidents of assault, vandalism and harassment reported, a 12% increase over the previous year. New York State had the highest number of incidents, according to the organization.

Buffalo’s Student to Student group was set to launch last March, with the teens



Student to Student, a high school peer education program, aims to reduce prejudice and bigotry surrounding religion.

– who attend high school in Amherst, Clarence, Buffalo and Hamburg – visiting other high schools. But then schools shut their doors because of the pandemic.

Over the summer the group reconstituted the program virtually, and held its first presentation in November to students in Hamburg.

At the beginning of the program, the students introduce themselves and say whether they are an Orthodox, Conservative or Reform Jew. And then one of them explains the difference between the three.

They discuss the Jewish life cycle, from birth to bar or bat mitzvah, marriage and death and the customs that take place at each milestone. The teens also discuss the weekly day of rest, Shabbat; the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, Israel, Kashrut – or Kosher food, and holidays.

“I learned a lot,” said Ella Pascucci, president of the youth chapter of Hamburg Coalition for Equity and Inclusion. “I’m hoping we will have the chance to continue to work together and do more presentations like this.”

“I think it’s very important to educate yourself about people who are different than you,” said one of the presenters, Ava Rosenthal, a sophomore at Williamsville East High School.