Note to judges:

This entry consists of one main story and one sidebar.

The main story, “Our kids and anti-Semitism,” appears on pages 1, 16 and 17.

The sidebar, “Looking back, ‘Hit a Jew Day’ target says silence is not the way” appears on page 16.
OUR KIDS AND ANTI-SEMITISM

BY ELLEN FUTTERMAN

Can We Talk? Panel Discussion

WHAT: Our Kids and Anti-Semitism
WHEN: 7 p.m., Tuesday, June 2
WHERE: JCC Carl & Helene Mirowitz Performing Arts and Banquet Center at the Steinberg Family Complex, 2 Millstone Campus Drive
HOW MUCH: Free, but RSVPs are requested
MORE INFO: For more information or to RSVP, visit stljewishlight.com/carvetak or call 314-442-3190 or email dmmaier@jccstl.org

Our kids and anti-Semitism

BY DAVID BAUERMAN

SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH LIGHT

At first, Cheryl Maayan wasn’t aware of the significance of the date. Ultimately, she felt the timing of the “Peace Through Pyramids” event in Ferguson made it more special.

“We didn’t even know that we planned this performance on what would have been the 19th birthday of Michael Brown,” Maayan, head of Saul Mirowitz Jewish Community School, said as she stood in a hallway near a noisy room full of youngsters at the Ferguson Municipal Library. Maayan was at the library on the evening of May 20 for “Peace Through Pyramids,” a circus-themed performance featuring nine Mirowitz students teemed with 23 children from Ferguson, the St. Louis suburb wracked by protests and rioting in the wake of the fatal shooting of Brown by a police officer last summer.

But this day was a time for healing. The performance featured jugglers, feather balancing and hula hoop tumbling. Maayan said that the show, for which the children had spent weeks practicing, was a way of learning about the power of collaboration.

“Circus arts require perseverance,” she said. “Students have to stick with it. You can’t just pick up balls and juggle them. You have to really work hard at it. That’s the message we want to send. You can’t just build a pyramid in a moment. You have to build trust and cooperation with other children who are part of that pyramid.”

The concept for “Peace Through Pyramids” isn’t a new one, as do words

As early as age 3, children begin noticing differences among people, be it skin color, facial features, even their hair. “How parents deal with the situation, how they address those differences when it comes up, is critical,” said Tabari Coleman, St. Louis project director for the Anti-Semitism, page 16

Mirowitz, Ferguson kids join to build Pyramids of peace

Cheryl Maayan, Head of School at Saul Mirowitz Jewish Community School, gets flowers and a hug from students after their circus performance with students from Ferguson last week. Photo: Andrew Kerman

Join the Jewish Light, the Jewish Community Center and the Jewish Community Relations Council for Can We Talk? a quarterly series on topics of interest to Jews
MISHPACHA (‘Family’ in Hebrew) is a new, monthly section in the Jewish Light, focusing on Jewish parenting and Jewish family life. The section appears the fourth issue of each month.

PARENTS — Share your story ideas with the Jewish Light’s editors at news@thejewishlight.com or 314-743-3669.

Looking back, ‘Hit a Jew Day’ target says silence is not the way

BY ELLEN FUTTERMAN (2015)

As a sixth-grader, Justin was on the bus to Parkway West Middle School when, out of nowhere, someone slapped him across the face. It was part of an unofficial school spirit week that started with “Hug a Friend Day,” then “Hit a Tall Person Day” and, finally, on a Monday in October 2008, to “Hit a Jew Day.” At the time, about 35 of the 850 students at West Middle were Jewish.

Justin was slapped several more times that day. And while he wasn’t physically hurt — the hits were mostly slaps on his arm — he felt emotionally drained by the time he got home from school. “Hit a Jew Day” happened to fall on his 12th birthday.

“At first, I didn’t say anything,” said Justin, now 18, who asked that only his first name be used. “But then my mom began asking how my day was, since it was my birthday. I remember breaking down crying.”

Justin’s mother, Amy, called the school principal, who “asked if Justin got slapped because it was his birthday,” said Amy, who, out of respect for her son, asked that her last name not be used either. “I didn’t get anywhere with the administration.”

Eventually, she got in touch with the Anti-Defamation League, as did other parents whose Jewish children had been slapped.

“As a school district, your job is to make sure every kid is represented and feels comfortable despite their religion, their race, their ethnicity, their gender, their nationality or their sexual orientation,” she said.

As regional director of the Anti-Defamation League of Missouri/Missouri Southern Illinois, Arroesty points out that when “Hit a Jew Day” took place seven years ago, “the conversation about how schools respond to incidents like this as an ongoing process and bullying and bullying by adults was more sophisticated and a lot less public.”

By the same token, she adds, dealing with discrimination and bullying is an ongoing process. “It’s not a matter of if we do everything right, it will be fine,” she said. “It doesn’t work that way anymore.”

The end of sixth grade, Amy encouraged Justin to transfer to another Parkway school with more Jewish students. He didn’t want to. The two would have similar conversations each year that followed, and the outcome would be the same. Justin wanted to stay put. After West Middle, he followed his class to Parkway West High School.

“Remember by freshman and sophomore years hearing the Jewish jokes,” Justin said. “Some were Holocaust jokes and were so bad I can’t even repeat them. One day at baseball my junior year, someone threw a quarter at me and asked, ‘Aren’t you going to pick it up?’ Even my friends would say, ‘I know you’re pretty cheap, aren’t you going to pick that up? It just went on and on.’

Justin told his friends he didn’t appreciate the Jewish jokes, but he says he didn’t retaliate or do anything confrontational. That just wasn’t his way then.

His breaking point came in April 2014, when three people were shot near Jewish organizations in suburban Kansas City. The suspect had said he went out that day to kill Jews. “I kind of hit me I wasn’t in a safe community with my peers,” said Justin, who tweeted at that time: “I’m done with the anti-Semitism at my school. It’s not a joke, and I refuse to let people treat me how I’ve been treated for the past six years.”

Before his senior year last fall, Justin transferred to Parkway Central High School, which has a significantly larger Jewish student population than Parkway West High. He graduated from Parkway Central a week ago. He plans to attend Indiana University.

“I’m a little nervous given what goes on around anti-Israel and anti-Semi- tism on college campuses. But I know Indiana has a high percentage of Jewish teens, with a really big Hillel, some Jewish fraternities and sororities, so there are lots of opportunities to connect with Judaism there,” said Justin, who became active in BBYO starting his sophomore year and has made a lot of Jewish friends through the teen organization.

Looking back, Justin realizes it was a mistake not to talk to an adult he trust- ed about what was going on.

“I just refused to talk about it with my parents, or school administrators, or even a teacher,” he said. “I was so nervous and intimidated about what might happen. I now realize that noth- ing is ever going to change unless you talk about it and bring it to someone’s attention.”

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the “Hit a Jew Day” incident shot the identity of an entire class.

“People fear that to start our careers at West Middle in a negative way, and we had to learn from our mistake,” Kirchofer related. “Obviously, at the time, we were horse to one another, our group really had more dialogue about being careful with your actions and your language, and understanding they have consequences.”

Handler says she sometimes wonders whether the consequences of moving to an area with few Jewish families was the right decision. She recently posed the question to her children.

“I asked my older daughter, ‘Mom, if we hadn’t moved out here, we wouldn’t have learned to advocate as well. I wouldn’t have joined (Jewish) youth groups and made new friends,’ “ Handler said. “And it’s true,” Handler said. “My kids do know how to advocate so much more than others because they had to do it from an early age.”

Engaged parenting works

Coleman, of the ADL’s World of Difference, believes proactive parenting can make a positive difference in how a child relates with women and minorities.

“You really don’t want a child to confront anti-Semitism or bigotry and not know what to do,” he said.

As a Leviticus, a biology professor at Washington University, said that after her daughter, who just finished fourth grade at New City School, read “The Diary of Anne Frank,” the two sat down and talked about how Jews were singled out for their differences.

“We’re also learning what’s going on in the world, like in Ferguson, to talk about differences,” she said. “We were driving down Kingshighway and we saw that a cop had pulled over a young African-American man. And, an African-American man. She asked if the man was being picked on because of his race.

Rosalind Wiseman, a nationally known educator and author who has written several books on bullying and ethical leadership, suggests parents have not how we treat people. Our family with kindness.”

Wiseman and Coleman also suggest that the way children learn is to feel emotionally safe ... (then) if the school walks them through their mistakes in a way that truly teaches them and gets them to treat others as they would like to be treated, then that’s the school that will make a difference.”

Proactive intervention

In St. Louis, there are avenues for help that support parents and teachers. The ADL’s World of Difference Institute worked with more than 3,500 people as school groups, nonprofits, community organizations and businesses last year. Coleman explains that he customizes programs to fit the needs and goals of each group depending on what that group hopes to accomplish. Certain programs allow him to work with entire schools while others focus on what that group hopes to accomplish. Even though the ADL charges a fee, Coleman says it is willing to work with groups that cannot afford the cost.

“Parents can prepare a conversation that at most lasts three minutes,” said Wiseman, who is based in Boulder, Colorado. “You can say, ‘I don’t know if you are witnessing people being racist, or using the N-word, or saying Jew in a derogatory way, or making jokes against Hispanics, but none of this is OK. This is not how we treat people. Our family respects people of different races and religions and teaches them to treat others with kindness.”

Wiseman also encourages parents to model behavior they want their children to emulate. “If a school believes that the way children learn is to feel emotionally safe ... (then) if the school walks them through their mistakes in a way that truly teaches them and gets them to treat others as they would like to be treated, then that’s the school that will make a difference.”

“By the time we are done talking, they seem to understand that Judaism isn’t some crazy thing like some people make it out to be, and it’s nothing to be feared. We’re normal kids, just like them.”

Adler, who attended Crossroads as a fresh- man after attending Jewish day school in Columbus, Ohio. At first, he wore a base- ball cap instead of wearing a yarmulke, because he said he didn’t want to answer questions about his head covering. Now, he says, he not only doesn’t mind answering questions about his Judaism, he actually welcomes them.

“My Judaism gives me a sense of belonging and pride,” he said. “I’ve also been lucky with how supportive Crossroads has been. I play baseball and, this year, my coach made sure not to schedule one game on the Sabbath, so I didn’t have to miss anything.”

Adler’s mother believes Crossroads’ commitment to diversity has helped strengthen her son’s engagement with Judaism. She was also pleased with how the school handled an incident involving her daughter, who attended seventh grade, and some other girls who got into a heated discussion about Israel in a World Civilization class.

“The conversation evolved to where some of the girls asked (my daughter): how she could defend what was happening in Israel,” Rutik Adler said. “Andrew jumped in. They emailed teach- ers, the school counselor and asked for a meeting. The school agreed immediately and sat down with the parties involved and had a nice, respectful conversation where they agreed to disagree. We have to respect that we have different opinions, but it’s important to have information behind you so you can speak knowledgably on the subject.”

In the hopes of furthering the dis- course, Andrew Adler helped establish a Jewish Student Union at Crossroads. The JSU of St. Louis was created in 2003 at Ladue Horton Watkins High School “to get more Jewish teens attending high schools to do something Jewish.” Today it has programs in 12 area high schools, including an active chapter at Pattonville High, where there are few Jewish stu- dents.

JSU is also a partner in the Danforth Israel Scholars Program, which helps high school students learn about the Jewish State from a historical and modern perspective.

“Every student has a tough time seeing the separation between anti-Semi- tism and anti-Israel,” he said. “They have questions as to why (anti-Israel protests are) happening and if they should be worried. They have real sense that the mainstream American news media is not really reflecting the anti-Semitic nature of what is going on.”

About Can We Talk? series is a collaboration of the Jewish Light, Jewish Community Relations Council and Jewish Community Center’s parenting in-depth cover- age and a community discussion event on a topic of import to the Jewish Community. The series receives generous support from the Harmon Kornblum Foundation.

What to consider when confronting insensitive or anti-Semitic behavior:

• Count to 10 if you need to calm down.
• Ask yourself, “Is this something I should respond to or walk away from?”
• Ask yourself, “Do I know enough to respond or do I need more facts?”
• Consider if it would be better to take someone aside rather than talking to a group.
• Do not laugh at insensitive jokes against Israel.
• If you’re not sure what to do, discuss it with other people.
• If you don’t respond right away, you can do so later—it’s never too late.

Source: “Confronting Anti-Semitism Myths & Facts” published by the Anti- Defamation League

Some local resources

The Anti-Defamation League of Missouri and Southern Illinois: In addition to investigating incidents of anti-Semitism, the ADL’s A World of Difference Institute is one of the foremost programs for anti-bias education in the country. Its Countering Anti-Semitism Project empowers the community to recognize and respond to acts of anti-Semitism and to challenge anti-Semitic stereotypes. 314-721-1270 or stlouis.adl.org.

Student to Student: Begun by the Jewish Community Relations Council in 1992, this unique St. Louis program seeks to reduce stereotypes and prejudices by bringing St. Louis area Jewish teens into schools that lack a Jewish presence. Jerusalem High School in West St. Louis County, and Jewish Student Union: A parent can prepare a conversation that way that truly teaches them and gets them to feel emotionally safe ... (then) if the school walks them through their mistakes in a way that truly teaches them and gets them to treat others as they would like to be treated, then that’s the school that will make a difference.”