



NOT IN OUR TOWN

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HIS YOUNG LIFE, the 16-year-old boy felt different just because he was Jewish. It was November 2013, and he had just gone into the boys' bathroom at Bedford High School, where he discovered a swastika scrawled on a stall door. The boy, a junior, reported it to a vice principal but couldn't shake the image. He couldn't focus at soccer practice that afternoon. As he walked the halls of his school, he struggled to control his emotions. "It was the first time I felt I had to look over my own shoulder," he says.

It wasn't the first anti-Semitic incident that year to roil Bedford, and it wouldn't be the last. Days before the teen's discovery, a school custodian had found a different swastika in black marker on the door of a boys' bathroom stall. Less than two weeks earlier, someone had etched a swastika and the words "Jews Kill Them All" on a plastic playground slide at the town's elementary school for third- to fifth-graders.

There were also disturbing reports to police and school officials about even younger Bedford schoolchildren: a pair of first-grade boys playing a math game and using the phrase "Jail the Jews" and a conversation about Hanukkah that included Christian kids accusing Jews of killing Jesus Christ. In the months to come, swastikas and other hate graffiti would turn up at least a dozen times at the high school, three more times at Bedford's two elementary schools, and eight times at Middlesex Community College in town.

These incidents clashed with Bedford residents' view of their community of just 14,000 residents as a welcoming place. The schools, in particular, had worked hard over the years to unite three distinct parts of the community—those who lived in town,

HOW A STRING OF
SWASTIKAS AND OTHER
VILE GRAFFITI ACTUALLY MADE
A COMMUNITY STRONGER.

BY LINDA K. WERTHEIMER

ILLUSTRATION BY SHOUT

those from Hanscom Air Force Base, and the Boston children who came to Bedford through the METCO program. The town, which is 86 percent white, 9 percent Asian, 3 percent non-white Hispanic, and 2 percent black, has experienced racial tensions in the past, but no one had sensed dividing lines based on religion. Christianity is the main faith, with churches of several denominations, including Baptist, Catholic, and Lutheran. The Jewish community is too small for its own temple (estimates of the Jewish population in the overall Boston area are around 5 percent).

The incidents stunned residents and leaders. “We really exposed ourselves, because if it could happen in Bedford, it could happen anywhere,” says Margot Fleischman, a selectwoman. Amid the shock and sadness, though, there was also hope. From the start, school leaders went public with the incidents. Openly confronting the anti-Semitism became the start of an education for Bedford’s youth and adults, including the police chief, who would form a partnership with a rabbi. Teachers and students began learning how to have conversations about difficult subjects like religion and race. People united to make it clear that expressions of hate toward any group were unacceptable in their town. “We will work collaboratively to rid our community of hate,” Police Chief Robert Bongiorno vowed in a public letter.

Communities all over the state too often find themselves confronting this problem. The New England chapter of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) received reports of more than 40 anti-Semitic incidents across Massachusetts in 2014. The list that year included the toppling of headstones at a Jewish cemetery in Auburn, a red swastika and Jewish slurs painted on a bike path in Billerica, and a state employee in Boston overhearing a colleague say “throw a few Jews in the fire” during a conversation by a wood stove. This year, the list will likely include the July 20 discovery of a swastika constructed of cinder blocks on a high school track in Millbury.

These kinds of incidents don’t define a community, says ADL regional director Robert Trestan, but they can deeply test how willing residents are to respond to them. Bedford decided it was up to the challenge. “You can’t judge Bedford because these things happened in Bedford,” he says. “You judge Bedford on how it responded to it.”

IN MARCH 2014, I sat among nearly 200 people in the sanctuary of Temple Isaiah in Lexington, where I attend, as Bedford’s superintendent and other speakers discussed the outbreak of anti-Semitism in the schools. It was a meeting held for the Jewish community, but non-Jewish town leaders came as well. I sat there in the safest place I knew, stunned by what I was hearing, though



Bedford High School student Avery Kaplan (above) participates in a community-building event. Facing page: Police Chief Robert Bongiorno (center) and Rabbi Susan Abramson (right) at a lesson in challah making.

perhaps I shouldn’t have been. Growing up in a small Ohio town in the 1970s and 1980s, my brothers and I were the only Jews in our school and sometimes the target of anti-Semitic remarks.

I also know that today, decades later, anti-Semitism and other examples of hate are still all too present. Nearly 300,000 violent and property hate crimes happen in the United States every year, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. That number hasn’t really changed in the past decade, but the motivation behind them has shifted. Hate crimes spurred by religious bias nearly tripled between 2004 and 2012, from 10 percent to 28 percent. Jewish organizations have become particularly concerned about rising anti-Semitism on college campuses.

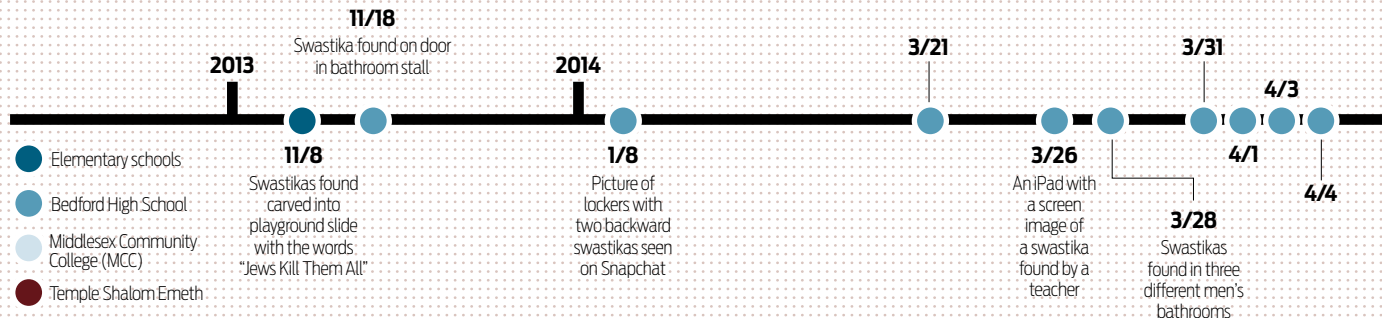
There was little anger at the forum that night. Instead, there were vows to act. “We are not victims,” said Rabbi Susan Abramson, who has lived in Bedford for 23 years. A sixth-grader described how earlier that year she had heard seventh-graders call two African-American kids the “n word.” She said she wanted everyone to realize that the problem was more than a Jewish issue. “It’s a human issue,” Abramsom agreed.

Abramson has led Temple Shalom Emeth in Burlington, frequented by her Bedford neighbors, for more than three decades. The 61-year-old rabbi has known many of Bedford High School’s Jewish students since birth. Although she had little exposure to anti-Semitism as a child— she grew up in what she calls the “Jew-

SEASONS OF HATE

A timeline of anti-Semitic and racist graffiti found at schools in Bedford and a Burlington synagogue. Each dot represents one report.

SOURCE: BEDFORD POLICE





ish bubble” of Newton—she’d heard discomfort and alarm from some of her congregants, especially the teens.

Early on, Abramson, together with the Bedford Interfaith Clergy Association, created a campaign called “Love Your Neighbor, Bedford Embraces Diversity” and printed the slogan on bumper stickers and fliers that are still visible today. She also began to build a relationship with Robert Bongiorno, the Bedford police chief, who sought her counsel on how to connect with the Jewish community. Although Bongiorno admitted he knew nothing about Judaism, he wanted to learn. Born and raised in Arlington Heights, the 46-year-old grew up on Mount Vernon Street, the dividing line between two Catholic parishes, and attended a Catholic middle school. Bongiorno, who became Bedford’s chief four years ago, describes himself as a “kind of sheltered Italian Catholic mama’s boy.” But his inability to stop what was happening kept him awake at night. “What can I do?” he asked Abramson.

Bongiorno stayed in touch with the rabbi to keep her advised of the ongoing investigation. His department worked with the ADL, the FBI, security from the Hanscom base, and the Middlesex district attorney’s office to investigate the incidents. They wondered if the swastikas were the work of one person or perhaps an organized hate group. Police identified one person of interest after the first swastika discovery but lacked proof to make an arrest.

As they continued to work together, Abramson presented Bon-

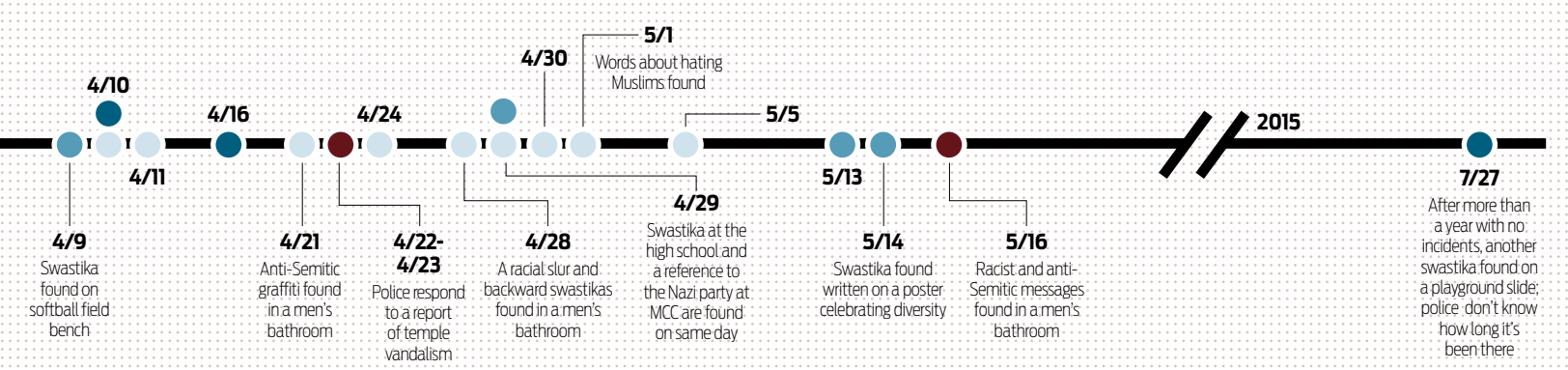
giorno with a children’s book she wrote, *Rabbi Rocketpower and the Mystery of the Missing Menorahs, a Hanukkah Humdinger*. The hero of her four-book series uses superhuman powers to save Jewish holidays from disaster. “Oy Vay! Up, up and away! Rabbi Rocketpower will save the day!” the character shouts before flying off on her latest adventure.

Abramson, of course, didn’t have any special powers to singlehandedly save the day in Bedford. “We can’t cure anti-Semitism. We can’t cure bigotry,” she says. But maybe, with the aid of her neighbors and a Catholic police chief, she could make a difference.

“YOU MIGHT THINK IT’S NOTHING,” A HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR SAID OF THE SWASTIKAS IN THE SCHOOLS. “IT’S NOT NOTHING.”

AT FIRST, Avery Kaplan wasn’t sure whether the first swastika at Bedford High was anything but a stupid prank. But that view changed to disbelief and anger when more swastikas were found in the roughly 900-student school, where she will be a senior this fall. Some non-Jewish friends seemed more concerned about the bathrooms’ being closed than the hate symbols. She recalled one saying it wasn’t

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a big deal, that this stuff was history and she should get over it. “It’s not just bad that kids are drawing swastikas,” Kaplan says. “It’s bad that kids don’t understand it.”

School leaders, sensing the same broad lack of knowledge, made changes to address the problem throughout the system. Elementary schools assigned a book about respecting differences to each grade and adopted lessons from a program on teaching tolerance. The middle school deepened what it taught about comparative religions and added more instruction on the Holocaust, using the Facing History and Ourselves curriculum. Facing History, an organization based in Brookline, partnered with the schools to train teachers and high school peer leaders on how to deal with racism, anti-Semitism, and stereotyping.

When the swastikas started appearing in the high school in the fall of 2013, Henry Turner was in his second year as principal. He held an open-door meeting for students in his office, where some Jewish teens told him how peers threw pennies at them in middle school, summoning the stereotype about Jews being cheap. Turner was moved by the depth of students’ emotional pain. “They did not feel safe to be a Jew in Bedford,” he says.

Turner, a former history teacher, screened the documentary *Not in Our Town*, about how Billings, Montana, responded to a rash of racist and anti-Semitic incidents. He also went on his school’s morning television show to give a 15-minute lesson about the history of the swastika as a symbol of hate.

The very next day, another swastika appeared in a boys’ bathroom. It frustrated and worried the principal—perhaps the discussion was encouraging a student (or students) to act out—but Turner felt it was important to continue the conversation, particularly with Jewish students who had maintained silence about insults for so long.

Kaplan, along with a few other Jewish friends, wasn’t sure how much of the message was getting through to students. She believed too many teens were shrugging off the lessons and lectures. Thinking they could do more, she and other students formed a club called Walk in My Shoes. Kaplan, already a school athlete and an anchor on the school’s news show, worked with club members to organize an assembly with Agnes Bales, a Holocaust survivor who attended her temple in Burlington.

For the May 2014 event, teachers had to agree to cancel their classes before students could attend. Kaplan’s English teacher, Dan Niven, was initially reluctant. He didn’t believe some graffiti scrawled in the bathroom was necessarily an enormous problem. But Kaplan made such a strong case that he and his class attended.

Bales was born in Budapest and was only 6 years old when Germany invaded her country in 1944. Nazis took her parents away to a concentration camp,

leaving Bales and her 11-year-old brother in the family’s apartment. They were first placed in a Jewish orphanage, but fled after Bales’s brother overheard Nazis planning to take Jewish children to the Danube River, where 20,000 Jews would be killed. Bales and her brother ended up in the Budapest ghetto, where they lived for months on almost no food. Their mother survived the camps, but Nazis killed their father.

As the 77-year-old Bales told her story, there was a hush in the packed auditorium. Niven says he will never forget what she observed about the swastikas in the school. “You might think it’s nothing,” she said. “It’s *not* nothing.”

THROUGHOUT THE SPRING OF 2014, swastikas kept appearing around Bedford schools.

Many of them were at the high school, but examples also turned up at Middlesex Community College—including the words “burn in hell you Jew bastards” in one bathroom. Vandalism and hate messages were also discovered at Abramson’s Burlington temple. Worried about the rabbi’s safety, the police chief assigned a patrol car to drive by her house on a regular basis. Bongiorno knew the rabbi thought the patrols were unnecessary, but he was adamant.

Bongiorno and Middlesex DA Marian Ryan also met with Abramson and members of the Jewish community at the rabbi’s home that spring. Around a dozen people came, including Kaplan and three other Jewish students, who helped give him a better sense of what it was like to be a Jew in a town where there were so few. Kaplan talked about declining to

pick up a penny for fear someone would stereotype her. Another student described difficulties during the Jewish holidays, because Bedford schools don’t give them off (students get excused absences but must make up the work) or stop extracurricular activities.

At Passover that year, Abramson invited Bongiorno to join her family and temple members for a Seder, where the chief took his turn reading a part of the Passover story. This April, he invited the rabbi to join his family for an Italian Easter dinner. She ate only an orange because she was keeping kosher for Passover, and they joked about her scant appetite.

Bongiorno grew to see the rabbi as a friend and teacher. “She gives me a unique perspective on things that happen in daily life, whether it’s anti-Semitism or anything else,” he says. At the invitation of the ADL, Bongiorno took a trip with other law enforcement leaders to Israel. Abramson tried to teach him Hebrew vocabulary via e-mail, and he taught her police lingo like “roger” and “over and out” in return. He became an occasional visitor to her temple, attending the annual Holocaust memorial service and participating in a special service for police.

One Sunday afternoon this spring, the two teamed up for a lesson on challah baking at Bedford’s First Church of Christ, Congregational. About 50 people sat at round tables with mixing bowls in the social hall. Kaplan and her mother roved the room as helpers. Abramson took the lead and the police chief was her sous-chef. “I can bake a scali bread, but I don’t know about challah,” he quipped.

Abramson asked everyone to start with a tablespoon of sugar, a tablespoon of yeast, and then add hot water. She pointed to the chief to demonstrate, but he accidentally used salt instead of sugar. He joked that she should have labeled the ingredients. Later, she criticized his technique with a grin and a wagging finger. He was supposed to knead with his palm, not his fingers.

The rabbi gave a talk on challah and its role as the bread for Shabbat dinners and urged bakers to use their imagination to shape loaves. The police chief created a loaf in the shape of an R to the second power. “R Squared,” which grew from a reference to Rabbi Rocketpower, had become the chief’s nickname for Abramson.

The event was part of a continuing education on Judaism for others, including non-Jewish clergy who began to realize that they had no idea about how Jews were often stereotyped in subtle ways, says the Rev. John Castricum, the Congregational church’s senior pastor. “One of the things I realized is anti-Semitism isn’t a Jewish problem. It’s a Christian problem,” he says. “It’s our responsibility to deal with it.”

FOR MORE THAN A YEAR, since the end of the 2013-14 school year, Bedford had no anti-Semitic incidents. But then another swastika was discovered etched into a pink elementary school slide in July. Authorities can’t tell if it’s new.

Abramson knows that there is no panacea for



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hate. But she also knows that the town is in a better place for its efforts. After she gave the invocation at the Bedford Town Meeting, a woman approached her and talked about how when she was a child in town, she never would have imagined that a rabbi would give a challah baking lesson in a church. To Abramson, that meant that they were at least helping break down barriers between religions.

Bedford, Robert Bongiorno says, has become a town with a more unified clergy and community, with a more diverse curriculum in its schools, and with a police force better trained in how to tackle hate crime. "The legacy has been set for future students and for future residents," he says. "This was an outstanding community response to a horrible event."

For some students, the experience has changed their belief that they would go through life experiencing anti-Semitism only in history books. Avery Kaplan believes that in a decade or two she'll look back on the swastikas as just the first chapter of anti-Semitism in her life.

The boy who discovered a swastika in the high school bathroom has changed, too. Afterward, the boy, who did not want to be identified, went home and discussed what he'd seen with his parents and was surprised to hear them tell of their own experiences. Last year, he wrote his college application essay about finding the swastika and about how he hadn't

Puzzles on Page 30

THE GLOBE PUZZLE SOLUTION

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SUDOKU SOLUTION

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8	7	2	4	9	3	1	5	6

believed hate would affect him. He doesn't feel that way anymore. "It's part of growing up, I guess," he says.

In April, Bedford held a townwide Multicultural Festival at the high school with performances, speeches, and hands-on activities about race, religion, and ethnicity. There were serious themes, such as a panel discussion on discrimination and a talk by a Holocaust survivor. But there was lighter fare, too. In the common area by the cafeteria, children could make origami at the Japanese table and play dreidel at the Jewish one. In the gym, community members set up booths featuring items from Nepal, India, Mexico, the Philippines, Cape Verde, and other countries.

Julie Antriasian, the mother of two elementary students in Bedford schools, stood behind the exhibit she helped create on the Armenian Genocide of a century ago. Looking back on what happened in Bedford still turns Antriasian's stomach. "We thought it was disgusting. That is not Bedford," she said.

She gestured around the gym at children and adults so eager to share through dance, song, and stories of what made them different—and what made them the same. "This is Bedford," she said, "what we are doing today."■

Linda K. Wertheimer, author of the forthcoming Faith Ed: Teaching About Religion in an Age of Intolerance, will read from the book at 7 p.m. on August 18 at Cambridge's Porter Square Books. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.