

Upfront

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PERSPECTIVE

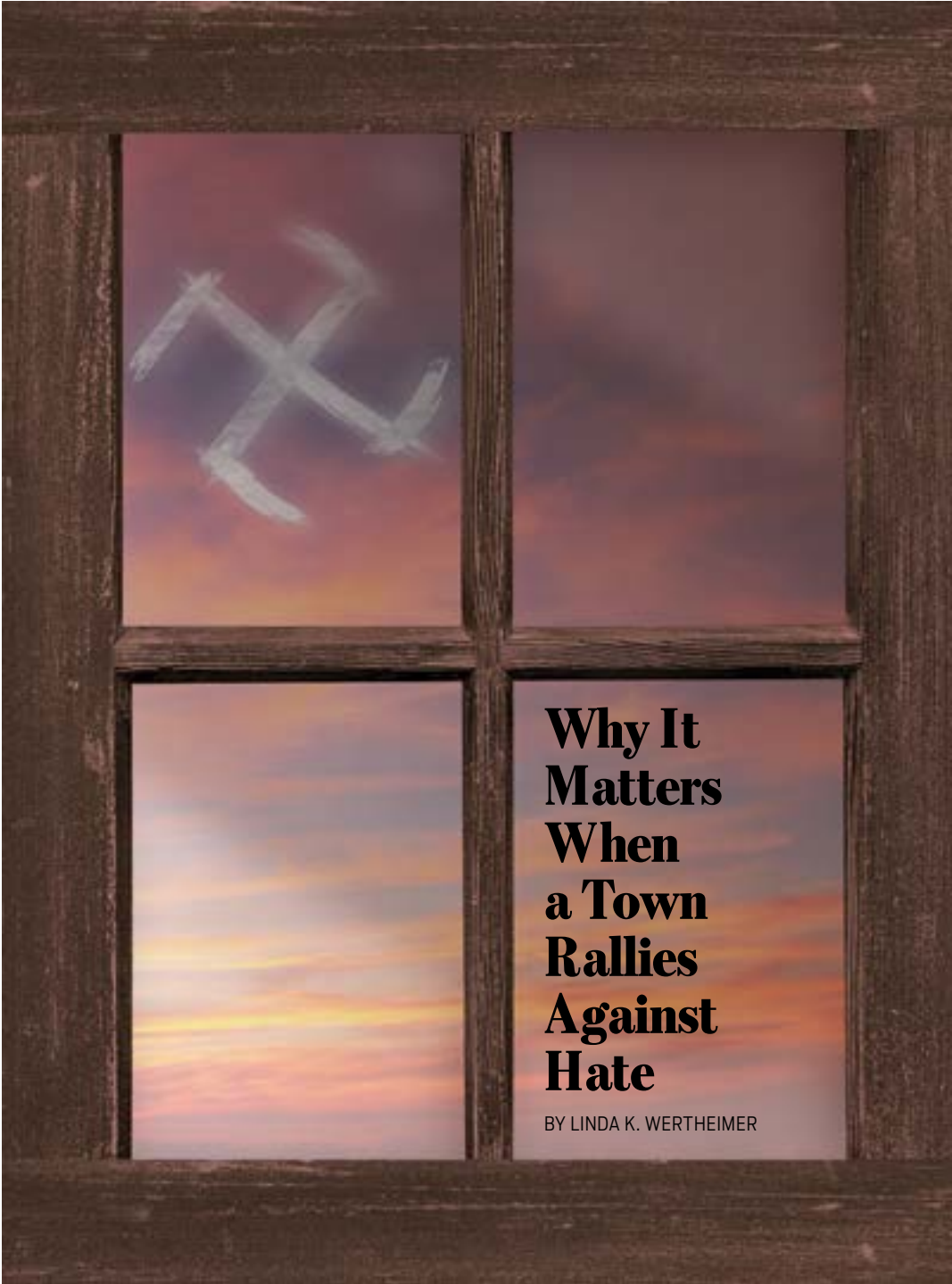
In high school, I woke one Saturday and spotted an odd shape on my bedroom window. Peering closer, I realized what it was: a swastika. Someone had scrawled thick white swastikas in soap over most of the windows of our house and on my brother's lime green Plymouth Barracuda parked in the driveway.

My father and brother scrubbed the swastikas away that same morning. My parents didn't call the police or the school, though we were pretty sure kids were the culprits. We had little faith that our community or school would care.

We were the only Jewish family in the school system in Van Buren, Ohio, a hamlet about 40 miles south of Toledo. It was not easy to be Jewish there in the 1970s. I felt like an outsider, especially at Christmas and Easter, which my school celebrated with assemblies led by local pastors. And some of my peers had told me I was going to hell because I didn't believe in Jesus. But swastikas on our home? It made me more afraid to be a Jew.

Staying silent — not calling attention to ourselves — seemed like the right choice at the time. The swastikas were easy to wash away. But they were seared into my memory.

That day came flooding back to me recently, though. During a Lexington High School performance of *Rags*, a musical about Russian Jews immigrating to early 20th century New York, someone



Why It Matters When a Town Rallies Against Hate

BY LINDA K. WERTHEIMER

Upfront

discovered a swastika on the wall of a men's room. I live with my husband in Lexington now, and this is the school our 9-year-old son will attend one day. We had taken him to the musical just a few nights before. What was happening to the place I have considered a safe haven for Jews during the 11 years my family has lived here? My town has a thriving Jewish community including three houses of worship. And yet Lexington was no more immune to the acts of religious hate sweeping across America than any other town. I was shaken and angered to find religious hatred here, where we are raising our son.

But this time we did not have to decide whether to speak out. Lexington High's principal sent an e-mail to high school families expressing concern about the incident. When some idiot followed that by sending 1,200 students and community members another e-mail purporting to be from the principal but mocking the incident, the town's Christian leaders called for a rally against hate. Monsignor Paul V. Garrity, who oversees Lexington's two Catholic parishes, implored parishioners in his weekly bulletin note to think about what it is like to be persecuted for your faith and to speak out against injustice.

This time, it was Christian leaders standing up for the Jewish community.

When Christians lead the battle against hate, it sends a powerful message. They show that they see such incidents as their problem, too, not just a Jewish or Muslim issue. They also reduce the isolation so many religious minorities feel in America.

My husband is the son of a Holocaust survivor (his mother as a child escaped the Jewish ghetto in Vilna, Poland, now Vilnius, Lithuania). Our son, Simon, didn't know what a swastika was and why it is particularly painful to Jews until we were preparing to take him to the rally this June in the center of Lexington's Battle Green. Simon climbed around on a rock during most of the speeches, but he may

US anti-Semitic incidents were up 86 percent in the first quarter of 2017 versus the same period a year earlier, according to the Anti-Defamation League.

remember the sight of the people gathered there and grasp the point every speaker made: Hate has no place in Lexington. It has no place anywhere.

But hate is on the rise in America. Anti-Semitic incidents were up 86 percent in the first quarter of 2017 versus the same period a year earlier, according to the Anti-Defamation League. In 2016, Massachusetts had the fifth-highest number of anti-Semitic incidents of any state, with 125 (up from 50 in 2015).

Beyond holding rallies, we need to work to educate adults and children about religions. And we need to make deeper personal connections among different faith groups. Many religious communities in the Boston area are engaging in such efforts. A Greater Boston Interfaith Organization event in December drew an estimated 2,600 people of different faiths, filling the worship space and social hall of the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center in Roxbury. On July 25, at Temple Isaiah of Lexington, where I attend, its social justice team and leaders of the GBIO will partner with the Roxbury mosque to hold a teach-in about Muslims. The event will include area Muslims talking about their experiences in our region.

In schools, teachers can demystify non-Christian faiths by incorporating lessons about world religions from elementary through high school. Parents can speak with their children about the pain that hate symbols cause.

I still remember what happened to my family in Ohio. Our silence means I will never know if local Christians would have supported us. But now I know what it means when they do: It deflects the blow and lessens the hurt.

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