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LOCAL

'We need to be louder than hate': Officials, residents plot strategy to fight antisemitism

At Thursday's Town Hall, Palm Beach County Mayor Gregg Weiss brought together local Jewish, civil rights and education leaders along with Sheriff Ric Bradshaw.

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DELRAY BEACH — Jon Minadeo and his hate group last month found their way to the Chabad of South Orlando. Bullhorn in hand, Minadeo would approach visitors' car windows and spew repulsive antisemitic remarks that were as infuriating as they were shocking.

His fascist Goyim Defense League — members regularly give the "Sieg Heil" arm raise — relocated in December to Florida from California. It is responsible for hateful flyers distributed in Boca Raton and other Florida cities. It has hung banners with hateful sayings in public spaces.

The group's arrival in Florida has coincided with hateful antisemitic messages projected on buildings in West Palm Beach, Jacksonville, Daytona Beach and Orlando.

In an effort to push back against the rising tide of antisemitism, Palm Beach County Mayor Gregg Weiss held a panel discussion Thursday morning at the South County Civic Center in suburban Delray Beach. He brought together local Jewish, civil rights and education leaders along with Sheriff Ric Bradshaw.

“This is not just an issue, though, for the Jewish community,” Weiss said. “It's an issue for all of us. When one group is targeted, it undermines the fabric of our society.”

PBSO: Combating hate groups is top priority

The wide-ranging discussion not only addressed the Minadeos of the world but also the underbelly of social media where hate incubates. It discussed how many of these groups also target minorities or LGBTQ groups.

Bradshaw spoke about law enforcement's efforts and how he wants the Legislature to give him more tools. And the 260 people attending — it was also livestreamed — heard how Palm Beach County schools are working to teach a new generation about the Holocaust through an immersive exhibit.

“In the 1930s, a lot of people in Europe stood by silently. We need to learn from that time period and know we can't stand by silently. We need to be louder than hate,” said Kimberly Coombs, a program planner for Holocaust studies for the Palm Beach County School District.

Besides Coombs and Bradshaw, the panel included Lonny Wilk, deputy director of the Anti-Defamation League Florida; Laurence Milstein, regional director for the American Jewish Committee Palm Beach County; and Alan Poland, community security director of the Jewish Federation of South Palm Beach County.

Patrick Franklin, CEO of the Urban League of Palm Beach County, and Rand Hoch, president and founder of the Palm Beach County Human Rights Council, rounded out the guest speakers.

Bradshaw at one point referenced Minadeo's group.

“I can tell you right now if they come to Palm Beach County and they stand on the roadside and inhibit the rights of the people who live here, they're going to jail,” he said to a round of applause.

The sheriff said that combating hate groups is a top priority. He says a multi-agency fusion center is located in Palm Beach County to detect, prevent and investigate activity by hate groups. He urged the audience to make sure they report incidents of antisemitism to the sheriff's department.

“You can’t be silent. You can’t say I’m going to let my neighbor next door do it because I don’t have time,” Bradshaw said. “You got to get involved. You got to get engaged.”

Social media can spread hate 'at lightning speed,' forum speakers say

Poland, Milstein and Wilk spoke about the different facets of antisemitism — for instance, how it can sometimes manifest as anti-Zionism — and how incidents in Florida have risen precipitously in the past two years. A recent study by the Pew Research Center found that 2.5% of all Americans identify as Jewish.

It comes from all directions. Groups like Minadeo’s often affiliate with white supremacists, Christian nationalists, anti-LGBTQ factions and QAnon.

Wilk addressed how social media and gaming have become a hotbed for such hatred.

“We also need to look at approaches to empower our children to stand up against antisemitism and all forms of bigotry, racism and homophobia,” Wilk said.

He said 85 percent of those ages 18 to 29 have experienced some kind of online antisemitism.

“We can't ignore social media, the prevalence of social media today to be able to put out, at lightning speed, hate and send it across the world in seconds,” Wilk said.

A fear to speak out was present among the audience

A group of women from the Bellagio retirement community near Lake Worth Beach talked at length with The Palm Beach Post before the event started about why they felt it necessary to attend but then later said didn’t want to be identified by their last names.

Peggy Insel of Boynton Beach, though, said she attended because she is a child of Holocaust survivors. “I would like to make sure for my children and my grandchildren that something like that doesn’t happen here,” she said.

Somewhat surprisingly, the discussion didn't dive into the country's partisan divide.

Franklin of the Urban League did note that the state legislature has made it harder for Blacks to vote in Florida and briefly referenced how recently an AP high school African-American studies course came under fire.

“Hatred spills over into every category,” he said. “It affects not our Jewish brothers and sisters but also affects African-American culture and community.”

Hoch noted the acts of violence perpetrated against the LGBTQ community, noting 27 trans people — mostly of color — have been murdered in Florida since 2015.

“Transphobia and homophobia are very serious problems here in Florida,” said Hoch.

'What you would expect to hear from a Nazi in 1940'

The Palm Beach Post reached out to the rabbi at Chabad of South Orlando to ask him about the verbal attacks that occurred on Feb. 17.

“When you hear these guys talk, it's exactly what you would expect to hear from a Nazi in 1940,” said Rabbi Yosef Konikov. “So now people are scared to come back. People are traumatized, especially people who have relatives or parents or grandparents who were survivors (of the Holocaust).”

At one point, Minadeo verbally accosts a woman in the passenger seat of the car, screaming in his bullhorn inches away. “Oh my God. Leave our country. Go back to Israel,” He says before insulting her looks with a Jewish trope.

“They were there for 3 1/2 hours,” Konikov said.

There is proposed legislation in Florida to combat hate groups

Weiss said these hate groups know how to go right up to the line of illegality.

He has applauded state Rep. Mike Caruso for sponsoring House Bill 269, which would make it illegal to project onto properties without the owner's permission and prohibits the distribution of materials that lead to littering. The Republican represents District 87, which hugs the coast from south of Lantana to north of Juno Beach.

Weiss has also directed the county staff to craft a local ordinance based on one in Jacksonville that mimics Caruso's bill.

Palm Beach police cited Minadeo and three other members of his group for littering — a \$100 fine — in January for distributing his anti-Semitic leaflets to houses on the island.

Authorities also stopped a man who was distributing flyers in Atlantis and charged him with resisting arrest.

The Palm Beach packages incident follows similar flyers distributed in West Palm Beach and Boca Raton.

Contained in weighted, zipped plastic bags, the flyers promote the usual stereotypes and some new ones: that the U.S. media are controlled by Jewish interests and elected Jewish officials are behind gun control and “the COVID agenda.”

The ADL has identified one prominent member of his group as living in St. Lucie County and it is believed the group now is headquartered there. The ADL has a dedicated page to the Goyim Defense League, showing it aims to turn back the clock to 1933 Berlin.

These groups employ stochastic terrorism — the public demonization of a person or group resulting in the incitement of a violent act — as well as using mass media to promote violence.

Last month, authorities throughout the nation warned synagogues, Jewish schools and institutions that social-media chatter indicated that extremist groups were planning a “day of hate” Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath.

Hate messages coming via flyers and projections on buildings and lawns

On Jan. 14, West Palm Beach police learned about antisemitic messages being projected onto the side of the AT&T building downtown. Officers discovered two masked men with a rental truck, projector and generator.

Hateful messages targeting the Jewish community were also projected onto buildings in Orlando, Jacksonville and Daytona Beach.

On Monday, Volusia County Sheriff Mike Chitwood addressed Minadeo's group in no uncertain terms after banners were displayed with phrases such as "Hitler was Right" at Daytona International Speedway

"We are not going to tolerate this," calling the Goyim Defense League "a clown group" and "scumbags" and "punk thugs."

Chitwood said the group has a hit list of Jewish individuals and their supporters, including himself. He said two days after the speedway incident, a California man inspired by Minadeo's group shot two Orthodox Jewish men outside a synagogue in Los Angeles.

"This is not about free speech. This is about violence," he said.

Konikov agreed the group is looking to incite violence. Minadeo tried to say the rabbi hit members of the Goyim Defense League with his car after they stood in front of it as he drove into the center.

"From what we understand, they usually have weapons with them," he said. "They're ready to fight. That's what they're looking for."

Bradshaw urged audience members Thursday to reach out to their lawmakers.

"I can only work with the tools that are given to me. If I don't have the tools, I can't do anything about it," he said.

Weiss said it was his duty to speak out against bigotry and hatred.

"By taking action, we can create a world where all people are treated with dignity and respect, no matter their race, religion, color or background," he said.

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