

## Student educates peers on anti-Semitism

By Julie Stagis

WEST HARTFORD, Conn. — Liah Kaminer remembers hearing the collective gasp from the audience when two Hall High School seniors rapped “raise your hand like a Nazi” at a school assembly during her sophomore year.

It wasn’t the only instance of anti-Semitism that Kaminer, now 17 and an incoming senior, says she witnessed at Hall. There were other comments, like a boy asking two other students in her class if they were Jewish. When they replied that they weren’t: “oh, good,” Kaminer recalled the boy saying as he patted them on their backs. “You’re one of us.”

Kaminer, who is Jewish, said she was hurt and uncomfortable by the remark, and tired of seeing such comments swept under the rug. So she decided to take action.

After reaching out to the administration and connecting with social studies department supervisor Stephen Armstrong, Kaminer and Armstrong put together a class on anti-Semitism. They presented it to every ninth-grade social studies class during the last week of school this year.

“We wanted to put a stop to (anti-Semitism), but how do you do that?” Kaminer said. “So we wanted to address the history of anti-Semitism and where a lot of these thoughts and stereotypes come from, so that instead of just telling people ‘it’s bad to say this and that,’ we can tell them why what they’re saying is incorrect, and why it’s so hurtful.”

In the class, Kaminer and Armstrong showed a clip from the ABC show, “What Would You Do?” where actors portrayed a Jewish couple and a bakery employee who berated them with anti-Semitic comments. They sparked discussions and talked about what stereotypes students have heard.

“I was a little taken aback by how much of this still goes on at Hall,” Armstrong said. “That’s why we’re doing this.”

“I think it was very effective,” Kaminer said. “No one said anything against what we were saying. A lot of the kids were very responsive.”

Armstrong said that although students are taught about the Holocaust in history classes, “it’s seldom that kids are asked to think about this topic in a contemporary way.”

Making students realize that anti-Semitism is not a thing of the past is important, Armstrong said.

“Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust didn’t end when Hitler died,” he said. “This is ... still an issue in West Hartford, Connecticut, and, by the way, this is an issue that’s still an issue in our school.”

The fact that a student was teaching her peers made the class more effective, Armstrong said.

“I think what made this better is that it wasn’t just me as a teacher saying this,” he said. “I could’ve done it – a couple classes I did it myself – but it was infinitely more effective when a kid was with me. It wasn’t just some teacher talking. It was a kid who had experienced some of the stuff very personally.”

Others have likely experienced similar situations, although the Anti-Defamation League says reported anti-Semitic incidents have declined steadily over the past three years.

In a report released late last month, the Anti-Defamation League said the number of documented anti-Semitic incidents in the state dropped by more than half – from 43 to 17 – from 2011 to 2012. The 2012 events included 13 incidents of harassment and four incidents of vandalism, according to the ADL.

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Among them, a West Hartford kindergartner told a classmate: "Jews don't care about God," according to the ADL report.

"The bottom line is, 17 anti-Semitic incidents in Connecticut is 17 too many," said Gary Jones, regional director of ADL's Connecticut office.

Kaminer and Armstrong hope to continue and possibly expand the program. Kaminer said she will do it again this year and would love to pass it on to younger students, as well as see it at other schools in the district.

"Where I admire Liah a lot is, there's a ton of kids that if they experienced this, wouldn't say boo about it," Armstrong said. "I admire her for being able to speak out."

"I was really proud, actually," Kaminer said. "It was unnerving, taking a stand on it in front of the kids, but once I got up there it was fine. I think it did make a difference. I brought it to people's attention."

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(Hartford, Conn.). 8-1-13.**

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