

"It happened to us, but it is not us"



By Brock Weir

It was a typical early fall morning for students at Hartman Public School last Wednesday.

But, once they went outside to practice for next week's track and field meet, what they saw was very much out of the norm: graffiti spray painted on a school portable and outdoor infrastructure that York Regional Police are describing as 'hateful, anti-Semitic, and anti-Black.'

They were left shaken but undeterred by what happened but rather than letting it get the better of them, the community has instead used the incident to spur a display of strength, unity and resilience.

York Regional Police were called to Hartman, located on River Ridge Boulevard, just after 9 a.m. on September 27, by the York Region School Board.

Students participating in the cross country practice brought the hateful graffiti to the attention of a teacher who, in turn, called Principal Stephen Helston who hadn't yet reached the school. As soon as he saw the graffiti, proper protocols kicked into high gear signalling police involvement.

'When I spoke with the teacher, he said, 'You would have been so proud of our kids because they knew it was inappropriate and hateful,' Mr. Helston tells The Auroran. 'They understood that imagery and words like that are never acceptable.'

Hartman, he says, is a school that prides itself in creating an inclusive and safe working environment for all students. This was very much the case in the aftermath of the graffiti incident as staff banded together to develop grade appropriate lessons and messages for students that 'Everyone belongs, everyone is valued, and everyone is special.'

'Our staff was very supportive and they took the time to respond to questions when they came from different kids,' says Mr. Helston. 'We had a little bit of support from our Inclusive Schools team and they spent time speaking with our Grade 6 and 7 classes.'

At the end of the day, Mr. Helston says the parents he spoke to were 'just in a state of shock and disbelief' that this could have happened in 'their school, their park.'

'They said, 'This is not who we are,' and we concurred with that,' he says, adding a letter was sent out to the Hartman community at the end of the day explaining what had happened and reiterating that this was not who they are as a school.

'The graffiti happened to us, but it is not who we are as a school,' he says. 'We also put supports in place to help people deepen their understanding. We don't teach kids what to think; we teach kids how to walk through critical thinking and this is a teaching opportunity for discussion with kids.'

This approach bore fruit on Friday morning.

At the end of each week, students and staff gather for what the school describes as a 'Good News' assembly, which is a moment to salute students within the Hartman community who have demonstrated strong character traits and good values.

This time, each and every student, from the smallest Junior Kindergartener to the Grade 8s looking forward to high school, took centre stage.

The school gave every student a piece of tape. Everyone was asked to write a single word, sentence, or phrase that came to mind on what Hartman Public School means to them. At the assembly, each piece of tape was collected by a Grade 8 student and assembled in two murals designed in the shape of the Hartman School logo, a human figure, arms raised in strength and triumph.

"We got everyone in the school to write what came into their head when they talked about Hartman," says Grade 8 student Helene Wong. "They talked about love, peace, safety and sharing and a lot of things like that."

"Happy" was the word that came into the mind of fellow Grade 8 student Keira Fraser.

"When I come to school, I have friends and teachers who are awesome and that makes me happy," she says.

From their perspective, the initiative is to show the perpetrator of the hateful graffiti that Hartman is "so much more" than that.

"We are a loving school and I think this shows that perfectly," says Helene. "I wrote 'safety' because I am always welcomed here, I wouldn't be judged here, and it is a very welcoming school."

As they looked at the completed murals, the students say they want the perpetrator to know that the graffiti did not impact how Hartman Public School students "cooperate" with each other.

"If we could invite the perpetrator to have a really deeper-level understanding about the love and caring that our school exudes day in and day out, that would help along as well in terms of understanding," says Mr. Helston. "It is about including, caring and thinking about everyone being equal."

Anyone with information on this hate crime is asked to contact York Regional Police's #1 District Criminal Investigations Bureau at 1-866-876-5423 x7141, or contact Crime Stoppers anonymously by calling 1-800-222-TIPS, visiting www.1800222TIPS.com, or texting their tip to CRIMES (274637) starting with the word YORK.