

New billboard in Marietta aims to raise awareness about antisemitism

Jake Busch jbusch@mdjonline.com Aug 5, 2022  0



The billboard is hard to miss when driving westbound on Roswell Road, past the East Marietta Shopping Center.

“Can a billboard end antisemitism? No. But you’re not a billboard,” reads the white block letters on the billboard’s bright pink backdrop.

It’s part of a campaign by nonprofit JewBelong to raise awareness about antisemitism. A spate of antisemitic incidents in Cobb County and around Atlanta have garnered widespread attention and led JewBelong to bring its national #EndJewHate campaign to the area.

Antisemitism in Cobb

In a September 2021 incident, swastikas and the words “Hail Hitler” were discovered written in a boys bathroom at Pope High School. Less than a week later, similar graffiti was found in a bathroom at Lassiter High School. A small swastika drawn in pencil was also found in a Simpson Middle School bathroom last year.

Addressing those incidents at a school board meeting, Superintendent Chris Ragsdale said the students responsible would be disciplined as “the district does not, and will not, tolerate hate in any form.”

More recently, in February, a student at East Cobb Middle School was photographed performing a Nazi salute while wearing an armband resembling a swastika. And last month, the Cobb County School District drew criticism for its proposed new logo of Eastside Elementary School, which many on social media said resembled the emblem of Nazi Germany.

Cobb school board member Randy Scamihorn said the school board and superintendent expect each Cobb schools student and staff member to be treated with respect.

“Any kind of discrimination or racism is unacceptable,” Scamihorn told the Journal Friday.

In response to the billboard’s association with incidents in Cobb schools, Cobb school board member Leroy Tre’ Hutchins said he wants the board to be proactive in addressing hate in Cobb schools.

“We are always in a place where we can be better as a district, and I hope that is our continued goal...to address these issues head on,” Hutchins said.

Stacy Stuart, who co-founded JewBelong with Archie Gottesman six years ago, noted that it was donors in the Atlanta area who made the billboard in Marietta possible.

“We have really generous funders who are in Atlanta who really wanted to shine a light on antisemitism in the state,” said Stuart. “These billboards were chosen just based on being in areas where there are people who will hopefully see them and care deeply about this social issue that really just doesn’t get as much attention as we would like it to.”

Raising Awareness

The billboard, Stuart said, will be up for about a month in Cobb, though residents can expect to see similar billboards around the metro Atlanta area over the next year.

JewBelong shifted more of its focus toward raising awareness about antisemitism beginning in May 2021, a month in which the Anti-Defamation League reported 65 incidents of antisemitism across the U.S. Stuart and Gottesman’s group began its #EndJewHate campaign around the same time, and JewBelong has put up billboards in cities across the country ever since.

Stuart said that JewBelong acts as the “top of the funnel” and a “launchpad” in the fight against antisemitism: it brings awareness to issues that funnel down to local Jewish Federations, Jewish Community Centers and other groups where people can leverage resources and educational opportunities to combat antisemitism in their communities.

“Antisemitism is real. I don’t think a lot of people ... realize that antisemitism is on the rise in a major way,” said Eric Robbins, president and CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta.

Robbins thinks Cobb is an area where antisemitism has gained a foothold.

“You had that whole Pope High School issue, the swastika in the school...Cobb County has been on the map for real (antisemitic) incidents, certainly in the last year,” Robbins said.

Combating antisemitism

Rabbi Larry Sernovitz of Temple Kol Emeth in east Cobb has been outspoken about antisemitic incidents around the county and is familiar with JewBelong’s billboards, which he said are “provocative in nature to get people to think.”

Sernovitz said he believes JewBelong’s decision to erect a billboard in Cobb was not random.

“I think that there is hate all over, but there has been so much in our community, and the purpose of our community being identified as a place for a billboard about this speaks volumes about the reputation that we are creating for ourselves, in not just the greater metro Atlanta community, but nationally,” Sernovitz said.

Sernovitz added that the billboard should be a wake-up call for non-Jewish people to understand they have a role to play in combating not only antisemitism, but all forms of hate.

“It’s a statement about what we stand for as a community, and that Jews shouldn’t necessarily be fighting antisemitism alone, it should be a community together,” Sernovitz said. “Just like Muslims shouldn’t be fighting Islamophobia by themselves, LGBTQ (people) should not be fighting by themselves and so many other groups together.”

Sernovitz believes the Marietta billboard’s message encapsulates the unified effort required to fight antisemitism and other forms of hate.

“It’s a beautiful statement about how we create community together, how we support each other, and how we make sure that we do not tolerate hate in any form in our community,” Sernovitz said.