

# Activists disrupt Newton forum on prejudice



KATHERINE TAYLOR FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**Newton Mayor Setti Warren (left) took a question from Charles Jacobs at a community discussion on making sure Newton is a welcoming place for all.**

**By Ellen Ishkanian** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 08, 2016

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NEWTON — It was a night Mayor Setti Warren planned to talk about prejudice in his community and how to move forward in the wake of incidents of anti-Semitism and racism in the city's schools over the past several months.

He spoke of understanding each other's differences, and of moving forward as a community to set the stage for a future where people with different backgrounds can feel comfortable.

But some in the audience had other ideas, wanting only to talk about anti-Semitism.

At points, it devolved into a forum where Jewish activists heckled an African-American woman who spoke of her son being called a vulgar racist slur at school, where the superintendent of schools was booed and needed a police escort to his car, and where a woman held a sign reading: "It's not prejudice, it's anti-Semitism."

People who did not identify themselves got up to say they were put off by the speakers who talked about the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the Americans With Disabilities Act, and marriage equality.

“This was not supposed to be about equal values; it was supposed to be about anti-Semitism,” one man said, as police officers in the War Memorial at City Hall stood and moved into the crowd of more than 150 who packed the auditorium.

The group of activists was led by Newton resident Charles Jacobs, who has had a longtime grievance with the city’s schools about what he says are pro-Palestinian and anti-Semitic text books.

At one point many in the audience chanted, “Charles, Charles, Charles.”

Warren tried to take control, walking into the crowd and explaining his reaction when he got an anonymous note last month about the first two incidents at Day Middle School when “Burn the Jews” was found scrawled in a bathroom in October, and a swastika was trampled into the snow just off school property in January.

“It was despicable, it was horrible, and it was anti-Semitic,” he said.

But after digging into the incidents, he said he found that there were not just those incidents, but also an incident in which racist questions were e-mailed to a black student group at Newton North High School.

“I was chilled, and just as angry as when I heard about the anti-Semitism,” he said.

Warren asked the crowd to show respect, and try to understand their neighbor’s perspective.

But it was the students who stood and took control of the dialogue.

Rebecca Wishnie, a senior at Newton North, said she has seen anti-Semitism in the hallways of the high school, but she has also seen racism and homophobia.

“It does not diminish me as a Jew to say anti-Semitism is not the only issue,” she said.

Josh Sims Speyer, a junior at North, also got up to speak. Sims Speyer said he was the one who found the graffiti in the bathroom at North, and as a Jew, he was horrified by what he found.

“But when we say one type of hate speech is worse than another, we build walls in our community,” he said.

The students said it was time to try and work together to tear down the walls, not pit one form of prejudice against another, trying to top each others’ hatred.

The evening began with a number of speakers, including Dr. Michael Jellinek, a psychiatrist, who tried to answer the question of why some people are able to take action while others stand silently by when hateful incidents occur.

He told the audience if “you want to be driven to action, you need to let yourself feel the horror.”

School Superintendent David Fleishman and students and teachers from both high schools also spoke, as did Police Chief David MacDonald.

MacDonald said an agent from the Boston office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation has been in town to investigate the incidents of anti-Semitism at Day and North, and determined that they “don’t rise to the level of federal involvement at this time.”

Newton resident Janet Yassen said it was her first time attending this type of community meeting, and she came because she was interested in hearing what Warren had to say.

But what she saw from some members of the crowd “disgusted” her, she said.

“It was embarrassing, it was awful,” she said.

After hearing the students, who at the end of the evening mingled with some of the most vocal in the crowd, Yassen said she was heartened.

“The young people were phenomenal,” she said. “For them to confront the disrespect shown by some of the adults was really courageous.”

*Ellen Ishkanian can be reached at [eishkanian@gmail.com](mailto:eishkanian@gmail.com).*

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