

VCIC hosts ‘Standing Together to Combat Anti-Semitism’

Approximately 125 people attended a community forum, “Standing Together to Combat Anti-Semitism,” on Jan. 12 at the Virginia Holocaust Museum.

Hosted by the Standing Together Steering Committee of the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities, the program featured remarks, an interfaith panel, a musical selection and community dialogues.

The Standing Together Steering Committee of the VCIC convened the event in partnership with ADL, Washington, D.C., Congregation Or Ami, Islamic Center of Virginia, Jewish Community Federation of Richmond, Keneseth Beth Israel, Side by Side, Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom, Temple Beth-El, Unitarian Universalist Community Church, The Valentine First Freedom Center, Virginia Holocaust Museum, Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy, and YWCA Richmond

The program included greetings from Samuel Asher, executive director of VHM; a statement from Rabbi Ahuva Zaches (who could not attend due to a funeral) read by community leader Miriam Davidow, an interfaith panel moderated by Rabbi Michael Knopf of Temple Beth-El with panelists Suja Amir, Rev. Alex Evans, Archana Pathak, and Rev. Dr. Corey Walker, a musical selection from Susan Greenbaum, a reading from Vir-

ginia Sen. Ghazala Hashmi, and 10 small group conversations.

In his greeting from VHM, Asher noted, “We stood together with over 2,000 people at the Weinstein JCC in October 2018, with people of all races and all religions. We worked together to send a message after the killing of 11 people at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Since then, the Poway Chabad, and many incidents in New York have taken place.”

He continued, “But we must do more than react to atrocities. We must be proactive and try to mend the tear in the fabric of our society. We must continue to have programs that bring us together.”

Jonathan Zur, president and CEO of VCIC, delivered closing remarks.

He noted the gathering was a result of “significant partnerships and relationships that have been forged over many years.”

Zur noted, “It was four years ago this very weekend when over 600 people came together at Congregation Beth Ahabah ... to stand together with the Muslim community in response to a proposed ban on Muslims coming to the United States.”

He said it was the catalyst for the formation of the community Standing Together Steering Committee.

Editor’s Note: See the special message from Rabbi Zaches on the next page.



(From left) Interfaith panelists at the event were Rev. Dr. Corey Walker, a visiting professor at the University Richmond; Archana Pathak, a professor in the Women’s Studies Department at VCU; Rev. Alex Evans, pastor at 2nd Presbyterian Church; Suja Amir, a member of the West End Islamic Center; and Rabbi Michael Knopf of Temple Beth-El, the moderator. Photos from Virginia Holocaust Museum and JCFR.



Samuel Asher, executive director of the Virginia Holocaust Museum, welcomes the attendees and delivers remarks.



Susan Greenbaum sings a special musical selection to conclude the event.



Virginia Sen. Ghazala Hashmi reads a Standing Together Pledge that members of the audience simultaneously repeated while reading from their smartphones.



(Clockwise from left) Jonathan Zur, president and CEO of VCIC, delivers closing remarks at the Standing Together event. Also pictured are three of the 10 small conversation groups who spent time together after the panel discussion. Each of the approximate 20-minute conversations was facilitated by a community volunteer.



A message from Rabbi Zaches

Editor's Note: The following remarks at the Standing Together forum were read by Miriam Davidow. Rabbi Ahuva Zaches was unable to attend.

By Rabbi Ahuva Zaches

I remember the year I was deemed old enough to hear our Synagogue's guest speaker for Holocaust Remembrance Day. I was 12, and adults were still trying to figure out the age at which it might be appropriate to explain why so many of the sweet grandparents at our synagogue had numbers tattooed on their arms.

Each year, there would be a different speaker sharing their personal story of how they survived the Holocaust.

As teenagers, my classmates and I were always riveted by their stories, which emphasized their determination to live, their cleverness, and their comparatively good luck.

Most people did not survive the camps. I remember talking with my classmates about what we would have done if we had lived in Europe during WWII.

My Hebrew School teacher told us we

were lucky because as Americans living at the beginning of a new millennium, we did not have to worry about being killed simply for being Jewish.

Sure, there was the occasional graffiti on Jewish institutions. But we knew what to do. When someone spray-painted a swastika on the wall of a Synagogue or Jewish Community Center, we would call the police and simply paint over it.

We might have been a little shaken by that symbol of hatred, but we weren't living in fear for our lives.

Today is different. The children going to Hebrew School now have parents wondering if bringing their kids to a synagogue is putting their lives at risk. People of all ages have been worrying about this since October 27, 2018, when eleven Jews were murdered while praying in their synagogue in Pittsburgh. We desperately wanted to believe that attack was a fluke, something horrific that would not happen again. But six months later on April 27, 2019, there was another fatal shooting as Jews celebrat-

ed Passover at a synagogue in Poway, California. Then last month, more Jews were killed while simply trying to buy food at a kosher grocery store in Jersey City. And two weeks ago, more Jews were critically stabbed next to a synagogue, while celebrating Chanukah at their rabbi's house in Monsey, New York.

I'm starting to think that my old Hebrew School teacher was wrong. As a child, I was led to believe that America is the "land of the free," a country where people would not be persecuted on account of their religion or ethnic background. But now as an adult, I have to lead a community that lives in fear of the next attack. And frankly, it's exhausting. How many times can you organize a vigil? How many times can you utter the same prayer for the violence to stop before it starts to feel like a prayer made in vain?

I am so tired of this cycle of hate. As a Rabbi, I have spent too many hours discussing new security measures, when that time should have been spent working on

blessings for weddings or baby namings.

It's time for our community to take action against anti-Semitism and all other forms of hate.

To paraphrase the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I pray that we can finally realize that our lives are inextricably bound together. We need to build stronger relationships with one another across religious and racial boundaries. We need to hear each other's stories and to empathize with one another's pain. We need to overcome the distance between our communities and learn to see everyone as a full human being rather than an abstract stereotype.

Only then can we build a love in our community that is stronger than any kind of hate.

May we work together, not only today, but also in the many days to come, to replace the hate and brokenness of this world with love and understanding.

And let us say: Amen.