

The Sun

**Speaking on behalf of hate-crime victims  
Howard panel faces those convicted of biased actions**

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Jacques Fein, 59, whose parents died in the Nazi Holocaust, stood before two teen-agers convicted of spray-painting swastikas on Ellicott City streets. He tried to explain how one small act could spark a reign of terror.

It was more speech than confrontation, said organizers of a new panel designed as a sentencing alternative for those convicted of hate-bias crimes.

"I told them, whatever they do, good deeds or bad, have an effect on others," said Fein, a Columbia resident. "It's difficult to compare the Holocaust to their actions, but I tried."

The two boys were the first to experience the 90-minute program -- held in private because of their age -- that experts say is an innovative and unique approach to dealing with such crimes.

Besides Fein, panel members included a lesbian doctor and an African-American who grew up in segregated Washington, speaking of the damage of bias.

Designed by Howard County Police Cpl. Paul Steppe, the program is modeled after similar panels that confront convicted drunken drivers with victims of drunken driving, including family members of those killed in fatal accidents.

"This panel is a way to get the community involved in these crimes," Steppe said. "Hate crimes don't just affect one person, they hurt everybody."

Said Juvenile Master Bernard Raum, who sentenced the two teen-agers to attend the panel: "This will show what impact these crimes have on society and the victims."

Last summer, after reviewing county statistics for 1996, which showed a 22 percent increase in hate-bias incidents over the previous year, Steppe began searching for ways to combat the crime.

On the Internet, the corporal found details about Mothers Against Drunk Driving panels and began building his proposal, soliciting help from schools, the county human rights agency, prosecutors and judges.

Without Steppe, panel organizers say, the program never would have materialized.

"Paul has the most ingenuity of any police person I've met," said Robert Johnson, vice chairman of the Howard County Commission on Human Rights, who chaired the impact committee's panel. "This first panel was just outstanding."

Police and the FBI define hate crimes as criminal acts motivated by race, religion, ethnic background, sexual orientation or disability -- offenses on the rise in Maryland and nationally, according to statistics.

FBI data show 431 hate-motivated offenses in Maryland during 1996.

Anti-Semitic incidents rose

The Anti-Defamation League recently released statistics that showed anti-Semitic incidents rose 13 percent statewide last year, to 79.

David Friedman, director of ADL's Washington region office, says the Howard County panel is the first of its kind.

"It just sounds fantastic," he said. "It's very important for criminals to hear from victims about the pain they caused. There's a lot of potential there."

Baltimore County prosecutor Howard Merker says he would consider asking judges in that county to sentence racists and bigots to the Howard County sessions, or push to establish a similar panel there.

'Another resource'

"When the criminal is finished with jail -- no question -- we'd think about asking a judge [to sentence] him as part of probation," Merker said. "I certainly see this as another resource, another tool, the courts can use."

Chief Judge Martha F. Rasin of the District Court of Maryland said she hoped her judges would examine the program as a sentencing option.

"Our judges should certainly be aware of the panel, of its technique and mission," Rasin said. "After seeing how the drunk driving panels work, it seems that something can be created to deal with hate crimes."

Next year, schools might invite panel members to share their experiences with children, said Eileen Woodbury, psychologist for human relations with Howard County public schools and the system's liaison to the panel.

'A pro-active tool'

"We'd like to make this an even more pro-active tool," Woodbury said. "And schools and students are important to reach."

On the day last month when the two 17-year-old boys heard from Fein about the Holocaust, they also watched a video about a synagogue struggling with anti-Semitic graffiti and listened to panel members' stories about the pain inflicted by bias.

Mixed results

Afterward, the boys evaluated their experience. One expressed some remorse for spray painting swastikas in April. The other swore his participation was only a joke, according to the panel's organizers.

Despite the mixed results, organizers said they were happy with the outcome.

"We didn't want this to be confrontational," said Mary Campbell, an investigator with the Howard County Office of Human Rights, which has helped run the panel. "We did this as an educational tool, to reach these people. I think we did that."

Object of hate is real

Though experts and panel organizers doubt a racist can be transformed in 90 minutes, Steppe said the program should be given a chance.

Sitting at his cubicle at the Howard County police station, Steppe, the department's lone warrior against hate crimes, eyed a photograph hanging on his wall.

It shows a young girl clad in Ku Klux Klan attire gently touching an African-American state trooper, who's resting on his riot shield during a Klan rally.

"That photo says so much," Steppe said. "Maybe that girl is finally experiencing the group that her parents hate. Our goal is to show people the object of their hate is real."

Graphics:

COLOR PHOTO

NANINE HARTZENBUSCH : SUN STAFF

PHOTO 1

NANINE HARTZENBUSCH : SUN STAFF PHOTOS

PHOTO 2

NANINE HARTZENBUSCH : SUN STAFF PHOTOS

PHOTO 3

NANINE HARTZENBUSCH : SUN STAFF PHOTOS

Caption:

Panelist: Jacques Fein told two teens convicted of painting swastikas, "Whatever they do, good deeds or bad, have an effect on others. It's difficult to compare the Holocaust to their actions, but I tried."

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Involvement: Howard County Police Cpl. Paul Steppe designed a panel that is a sentencing alternative for those convicted of hate crimes.

Panel: Robert Johnson, vice chairman of the Howard County Commission on Human Rights, and Mary Campbell, an investigator with the Howard County Office of Human Rights, help run the panel.

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