

Anti-Hate Forum Sparks Emotion and Urgency From Wilton Community [UPDATED]

by Jarret Liotta
February 5, 2024



Panelists at the Confronting Acts of Hate event on Sunday, Feb. 4, 2024. Credit: Jarret Liotta / GOOD Morning Wilton

Editor's note: Although the original version of this story included images of panelist Prof. Sohair Omar, it did not include comments she made. The story has been updated and we apologize for the oversight.

A forum entitled **“Confronting Acts of Hate in Our Community”** held on **Sunday afternoon, Feb. 4**, aimed to assuage feelings of fear and isolation among area residents.

More than 200 people were on hand at the **Riverbrook Regional YMCA**, where the forum was presented by **Temple B'nai Chaim** of Georgetown in partnership with the **Wilton Library** and the Y.

The event was billed as a “community-wide strengthening event” focused on “antisemitism, islamophobia, ethnic exclusion, racism and LGBTQ+ hate.”

A panel of different minority leaders shared thoughts with an audience that included a bevy of local, state and federal officials, including **U.S. Rep. Jim Himes** and **U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal**, both of whom spoke, along with Connecticut’s **Secretary of State Stephanie Thomas** and **First Selectman Toni Boucher**.

“We’re gathered here in the community to confront hate,” said **Steve Hudspeth** of Wilton, who moderated the event.

“Our presence here is to be part of supporting those who are marginalized by hate speech or action,” he said, noting that instances of both have happened in Wilton.

Blumenthal pointed out that hate speech and crimes have been increasing in the United States since 2018.

“It was on the increase before the most recent conflict in the Middle East,” he said, noting the expanded activity of White Supremacist groups, expressing his belief that more legislation should be in place to counter hate crimes.

“Once hatred increases its momentum, it is going to be expressed against all minorities ... Once hate is given license, once it is legitimized, once it’s accept implicitly, it will spread and it will invade all of us ... We are all potential victims of it,” he said.

Himes said that the crowd in attendance didn’t necessarily need to hear the message that hate was wrong, but encouraged a broader understanding of how fear and a sense of disenfranchisement have exacerbated the frustrations of those who see minorities as a threat to them.

“People are scared,” he said. “People are anxious. People are dislocated by change.”

He said that, rather than simply hating people they perceive as being on the other side of the political aisle, it would be more beneficial to try to involve them in solutions and engage with them “as equals.”

“I was in the chamber on Jan. 6, [2021] and I saw what happens when people are consumed by fear and anger and rage and lies,” he said, noting that while there needs to be a clear message of what is acceptable behavior, there should also be attempts made to involve and educate people who are generating those behaviors.

“I think they change because they’re educated ... because they are engaged as equals ... because they don’t feel condemned, because they don’t feel detached,” he said, arguing for a practical approach rooted in “humility and humanity.”

Sunday’s event, which was surrounded by a high level of security, aimed to throw light on the experiences of different minority groups at the hand of hate speech and crimes.

One Muslim woman from the audience shared about her pain as a Muslim since the 9-11 attacks.

“Twenty years later nothing has changed,” she said, crying. “We’re human.”

Cantor Harriet Dunkerley recounted some of the instances of antisemitism that have occurred recently in Wilton, including an Israeli flag sign on someone’s lawn that had the word “genocide” scrawled on it in the early hours that same day.

She spoke of the fear being brought to college students around the country through antisemitism, but also **Wilton High School** students who have had Swastikas drawn on their personal property during the past year.

“Antisemitism has invaded our bucolic corner of Fairfield County with a vengeance,” she said, including bomb threats at Temple B’nai Chaim and hate speech on social media.

“Parents (are) wondering if they should keep their children home from school,” Dunkerley said.

“We are so much better than this, my friends,” she said. “This absolutely cannot stand and the only way to stop it is to come together as a community.”

“Enough is enough,” she said. “We have to take action to strengthen our community together and rid our neighborhoods of hate. And it’s not going to happen unless we work together.”

“Every human life is precious,” said **Prof. Sohair Omar**, cofounder of Afghanistan-Pakistan Women’s Economic Empowerment.

She shared about some disturbing events in Connecticut, including a Muslim student at the University of Connecticut who was the victim of racial slurs and subsequent death threats.

“This is in Connecticut,” she said.

“It’s not normal,” she said of hate speech and actions. “We shouldn’t normalize it. We should reject it in all its forms, everywhere.”

Wilton resident **Sarvesh Damle**, a member of the Hindu community, shared about the seemingly small instances of hate speech, intolerance and mocking that have had large impacts on younger people especially.

“These small actions commit a huge impact on the kids,” he said, including jokes about food, clothes and cultural customs.

“These are the things we face on a daily basis,” he said, and while they may not be reported about in the news or discussed throughout the community, that doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.”

Damle suggested that rather than treating the United States as a melting pot, it might be a better analogy to called it a salad bowl, where the individual parts maintain their unique flavors and identities.

Father Reggie Norman, pastor at **Our Lady of Fatima Church**, recounted his myriad experiences with racism, including being personally targeted and mistrusted in stores and on the street because he’s black.

“We have never defined what it truly means to be an American,” he said, citing the country’s long history of inequity, primarily driven by a wealthy white male ruling class.

“We have much work to do and it begins by recognizing that we are all in this together,” he said. “We will either soar or sink.”

Rachel Simon, executive director of the **Triangle Community Center** in Norwalk, spoke about the issues and hate being faced by members of the LGBTQIA+ community, especially young people who don’t have a voice.

Asked a question about “bystander intervention,” she suggested some ideas that could potentially help assuage someone’s fear and discomfort during an incident.

“Ask the person who is the target of the hate if you can help ... Sometimes it’s just as simple as sitting next to someone ... Some models say that you should record on your phone and give that ... to the person,” she said.

Sometimes, she said, people may be scared to even signal that they are in need of help, so it’s worthwhile to be wary of their behavior if you think they’re in the midst of a hate-directed incident.

“We all have to do things great and small to change the tide this country is taking,” said Thomas, who was asked to add a few words at the end of the event.

“Let’s hope as we move forward that we all stop having these stories to tell,” she said.

Jack Helmuth

February 6, 2024 at 3:44 pm

Stories like this are always trickier than they seem. After all, hate is bad. So-called “hate speech” is bad. Therefore we should do what we can to stop it.

But what typically happens as a reaction to gatherings like this is not unlike the reaction to 9/11 with the Patriot Act – we see rights get stripped away, all in the name of “protection.”

Does Wilton now limit expression of beliefs and shut-down debate about issues surrounding politics, religion, and other “controversial” topics, all in the name of what might feel good in the moment (eliminating hate)? I hope not.

It becomes a slippery slope when we start throwing around labels like “hate speech.” Who exactly gets to determine what hate speech is? I’ll guarantee you that at some point you will not like, nor agree with, the person who gets to randomly decide that, and that should scare all of us. Is it “hate speech” to speak against Hamas? Radical Islam? Israel? Is it “hate speech” to say that trans men should not be allowed to compete against cis women in sports? What if a Wilton cis woman lost a scholarship to a trans woman, and spoke about her experience and opinion that it was not fair?

Many of you would think that’s a fair point to make. But I guarantee you the second you question the popular Orthodoxy (at least in academia and Twitter), you’ll be accused of bigotry or hate speech. And open debate, scholarship, and society all suffer for it. So, please, let’s be kind and considerate and open to what happened at this meeting... while also not overreacting to it all.

Jack Helmuth

February 6, 2024 at 3:55 pm

And following up on my post – I just saw that admins for the Facebook group “Wilton 411” shut down comments after someone posted a link to this article!

I mean, this couldn't illustrate the point any more clearly. As soon as topics like this come up, speech gets shut down. Very disappointing, but not surprising.

Stephen Davis

February 18, 2024 at 2:07 pm

Yes 'hate speech' is a difficult concept. It is certainly a subset of free, constitutionally-protected speech and needs to be responded to carefully. And it does not include bullying, intimidation, coercion, or painting swastikas on lockers.

The UN (surprisingly) has actually done a pretty good job of defining hate speech as “writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.” (See <https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech>).

No rights are stripped away by educating communities about the effects of hate speech on others and how best to respond when faced with hate speech or hate incidents. Sure it's ok to hate and everyone can hate whomever they want; but expressing hate often just creates more hate and rarely achieves positive change or benefits the community.

Comments are closed.

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