

Denial is a great coping skill until some idiot comes along and makes us see the truth.

Diane Stingley

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Well sculpted

Tate Norden's large sculpture adorns the Wilton High School Auditorium lobby ceiling. It was put in place on Friday afternoon. More photos and story on page 6C.

—Devin Comiskey photo

Bias crimes rattle WHS

Police investigate slurs scrawled on lockers

by DEVIN COMISKEY

Someone or some persons scrawled racist and homophobic slurs across lockers and on personal belongings of several girls and students of color on Friday at Wilton High School. More racist graffiti on lockers was found Tuesday. These incidents took place only two weeks after someone left a bomb threat on a bathroom wall, prompting new security measures at the school.

Department of Justice officials said a federal investigation may occur.

In a statement released Monday, high school Principal Deborah Low said, "Early morning Friday, Jan. 30, several students reported that their lockers had a slur written on them ('nigger' by writing one letter on each of six lockers and 'dyke' on another further down the hall) and/or they had their belongings dumped on the floor, vandalized, and money stolen."

Ms. Low said she and other school administrators were working with police and tending to the needs of the affected students.

"I sent out an e-mail to the students, staff and parents early last Friday morning after several students reported slurs on their lockers. On six lockers. A couple of other students' lockers were rifled through and some cash stolen. Obviously, this is very upsetting and reprehensible," she said.

Students at the high school expressed disgust at the incident, but maintained determination to continue fighting all forms of bigotry. Targeted students included members of the 'A Better Chance' (ABC) program and

the current president of the school's Gay-Straight Alliance, who is also a student columnist for The Bulletin.

Several concerned parents and community members met with school officials to discuss

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DEBORAH LOW PROMOTED

Canty to take over as acting principal at WHS

by DEVIN COMISKEY

The face of the Wilton public schools' administration is going to see more changes come July 1.

Wilton High School Principal Deborah Low was promoted to the position of director of curriculum, instruction, staff development and technology during last Wednesday's Board of Education meeting. Assistant Principal Timothy Canty has been promoted to succeed Ms. Low as acting principal. The board voted unanimous-

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Bias crimes rattle Wilton High School:

Police investigate slurs scrawled on lockers

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fighting ongoing discrimination within the schools. Some of them claim there is a culture of racism and homophobia that is ignored by administrators.

Superintendent of Schools Dr. David Clune responded to these charges in a letter sent to The Bulletin and parents Wednesday morning. (See page 4A.)

Meanwhile, police are saying progress has been made during the investigation. No suspects have been identified.

“Officer Scott Sear responded immediately, took pictures and interviewed students. We have had counselors available to talk to students. It’s demoralizing and upsetting. They met in small groups to talk about their feelings and reactions. Some of the students affected asked us not to go on the PA to publicize what had happened, so we honored their request,” said Ms. Low.

“The students were very mature, and responded with graciousness. We’re continuing to investigate. Some information has been shared with us and the police. To the best of our knowledge, it happened Thursday evening. There were many events (happening) at the school. We do not know for sure if it was a Wilton student, but it is likely.”

Ms. Low said she is not aware of any undercurrents of racism or homophobia at the high school.

“This is a good time to talk about whether this is a pattern. I won’t say nothing has ever happened. I am really not aware of anything recently, however. We’re all concerned. If this is more than a single incident, then there’s more we need to do. I want to know. I’m asking for new suggestions,” she said.

Wilton High School has several student groups fighting against intolerance on several levels, including the Gay-Straight Alliance and the Diversity Club, founded by one of the ABC students, senior Qui-Juan Jones.

Community reacts

Senior Megan O’Branski, president of the school’s Gay-Straight Alliance, was directly affected by the vandalism.

“It was my locker that was vandalized. In response to what happened, we were just shocked. Something of this nature, you’d just like to think this doesn’t happen anymore. It was completely uncalled for. It was meant to generally offend people. It was just disgusting,” she said.

“There are some pockets of intolerance at the high school. As president of the Gay-Straight

Alliance, I run into that a lot. I’ve never seen anything racial before; it usually has to do with sexual orientation. Because it was our bank of lockers, I’m inclined to believe it wasn’t directed at any one person. It’s a display of complete immaturity. I don’t think it represents the school body. It’s immaturity and ignorance that should be dealt with. We walked into school on Friday and we grabbed the deans immediately and got them involved. They were very understanding and supportive.”

Megan said police had not spoken with her as of Tuesday afternoon.

Sharon Dunn was unnerved by the situation. She is the mother of a senior who wasn’t directly targeted.

“It’s still an unsettling situation. He is friends with all who were affected,” she said.

Ms. Dunn met with Ms. Low on Monday to talk about student safety and the significance of the incident.

“It is a bias or hate crime, and I wanted to be sure the administration was taking corrective action in pursuing any leads as well as assuring the school community the high school is a safe environment to learn and participate in,” she said.

“This is probably the first incident I know of on school property. Because this community, like any other, has its own challenges, we’re reflective of what the world is like, so we’re not exempted from the issues of the world,” she said.

“The key for me is that parents, community leaders and school administrators realize the seriousness of the actions, and in their own way send the message that this is not tolerated. It’s not a black and white issue, it’s an issue for the community,” said Ms. Dunn.

She said the kids she talked to told her there was “no indication” something like this could happen.

“On Saturday night, at the YMCA, there was a dance. It was the most diverse group of teens I had seen in this town in the 18 years my family has been a part of this town. It went off without any incident. It was fun and everyone enjoyed it,” she said.

“(School Resource Officer) Scott Sear was there. We had teachers who volunteered to help. It was run by the ABC group, their fund-raising group. We had kids from as far as Greenwich, Darien, New Canaan, Guilford and Ridgefield. There were close to 150 kids,” said Ms. Dunn.

“My point is that there was absolutely no incident.

Everybody had fun. So when something as serious as this happens in the schools, it’s very unsettling. Because we know 99% of this community doesn’t support this kind of activity,” she said.

To many, this case of vandalism and bias is an unfortunate aberration. Others claim, however, there is a history of racial and homophobic discrimination here that is virtually ignored by school and town officials.

Diana Prince, a member of Parents Against Hate Crimes, said this incident is not isolated. Her son, a fifth grade student at Cider Mill, was pushed into mud by another student last year and called a “slave,” she said.

“Nothing was done by anyone until I threatened to bring some black leaders into town, like Al Sharpton and the NAACP,” she said. “We didn’t want anything more than an apology from the school or the school board. The school thought it was just one incident and it wasn’t a big deal.”

Ms. Prince and her group sent a letter to The Bulletin this week stating “high school officials have failed to demonstrate clear and decisive leadership in response to the incidents.”

“We’re talking about young adults here and I’m very concerned,” said Ms. Prince. “The school administrators did not sit down with the ABC boys like they claimed and that’s why we came together to show them support and love. They just want to get on with this. But the boys are OK.”

Ms. Prince said she is close with one of the ABC students, as her family had hosted the student one summer.

“We are giving the police department time to investigate. But we want federal involvement because it’s a federal offense, a felony,” she said.

Kevin Callahan, a paralegal with the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington, D.C., said the vandal’s actions are a federal offense and indicated his department may pursue the matter.

Dr. Bill Cross, also a member of Parents Against Hate Crimes, reiterated the group’s concern that school officials didn’t respond appropriately to this latest incident, but offered a different perspective on how to deal with the offenders. He and his wife, Dawn, do not have any children in the school system, but are working for a more open community.

“You have an example with how well the high school handled the bomb scare, but hesitated until the last minute with this. We’re hoping that all parents can step up and make this a more positive experience. We want to

find out who the kids are and reach out to them instead of punishing them,” he said.

Police Capt. Edward Kulhawik said, “I know I can speak for the police department and the people who have worked here and lived here that this is not very indicative of what’s happening here.”

Board of Education member Troy Ellen Dixon dismissed accusations that proper actions weren’t being taken by officials.

She said, “I think the school is making its best effort to address this incident. But the fact that these incidents have occurred and continue to occur makes it essentially more than a school issue.”

“We’re all diminished by this sort of thing. This affects and needs to be addressed by everyone in our community and everyone in our community will do so in their own way. I want to make the point that this is a community issue. This time it was in the schools, in the past it was something else,” said Ms. Dixon.

Andy Mais, a member of the Board of Finance and director of the Voluntary Action Center in Norwalk, was originally critical of the actions and intentions of school administrators.

However, as events unfolded this week, he said on Wednesday, “I’ve been encouraged by the start of an open dialog on the issue and by the willingness of the school system in general, and the high school in particular, to not let this be business as usual, but to dig beneath the surface and acknowledge and explore the roots of this problem. I look forward to supporting the Board of Education, the superintendent, the entire school system, hopefully the entire community, as we work to make our schools a safe, welcoming environment for all our children.”

On Wednesday morning, Ms. Low told The Bulletin important steps were being taken by the student body and administration in dealing with what happened.

“As for the larger issue of intolerant behavior at the high school, I’m asking the students to think about the question ‘Do you think the event at the high school is relatively rare occurrence or a fairly common pattern?’ We want suggestions on how we might address it. Thursday, the students will spend some time writing down responses. We’ll be asking the Gay-Straight Alliance and Student Government to look at the answers and analyze the results. It will get a dialog going,” said Ms. Low.

In a letter sent to The Bulletin on Wednesday, Superintendent of Schools Dr. David Clune stated the district has a zero-toler-

ance policy towards hateful acts and is inviting parents and students to share any information or concerns they have.

“I am surprised and saddened that a hate crime occurred. I am surprised and saddened that some parents who have sincere and deep concerns about how their children have been treated, have not shared those specific concerns with me. As your superintendent I need to know the specific instances that have caused these general concerns about intolerance in our school system,” he wrote.

Officials respond

Capt. Kulhawik said Wilton Police responded immediately upon hearing about the vandalism.

A statement released by Wilton Police on Friday said, “Someone wrote the word ‘nigger’ on the lockers belonging to three students at the school. In addition, other unlocked lockers were entered and pictures located in the lockers were damaged with words written across them. The words written across the photos included ‘lesbian,’ ‘kike,’ and ‘nigger.’ If arrested, the subject responsible faces a charge of intimidation, based on bigotry or bias, in violation of Public Act 00-72.”

In an interview, Capt. Kulhawik said, “We’re trying to look at anyone who might have had a motive and try to develop a suspect. We have no suspects as of yet.”

A couple of detectives have been added to these cases to help Officer Sear investigate.

“This incident at the high school is really a hateful crime that does nothing but harass, intimidate and threaten certain individuals based solely on the color of skin,” said Wilton Police Chief Randolph Mineo. He said the department will do everything possible to investigate and prosecute the individual or individuals responsible for these acts.

Police received another report of a locker or group of lockers being vandalized with the word “nigger” on Tuesday morning after school started. They believe it was done by a different individual based on characteristics of the writing. At press time, it was unclear whose locker had been vandalized.

“Our hope is they just did this to get some media attention and it is our hope that this crime is not against any individual,” said Capt. Kulhawik about the second incident.

Police said the culprits would be charged with a Class D felony, the lowest degree of a felony,

that carries a maximum of five years in prison.

Mr. Callahan, the U.S. Department of Justice official, said the vandal’s or vandals’ actions are a federal offense. Intimidation on the basis of race “would be a misdemeanor punishable by up to a year in prison,” said Mr. Callahan.

He added, “If it’s a conspiracy, for example two or more people working together, than the charges are upgraded to a felony punishable by up to 10 years in prison.”

The FBI Uniform Crime Report defines a hate crime or bias crime as “a criminal offense committed against a person, property, or society which is motivated, in whole or in part, by the offender’s bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, or ethnicity/national origin.”

First Selectman Paul Hannah said he was keeping abreast of the events within the schools, but isn’t aware of any longstanding problems here.

“I always have a lot of faith in our school administrators and their ability to handle things in a proper manner. I’m very disappointed that these slurs appeared. It’s disappointing. I’d be happy to talk anyone who feels there’s a bigger problem and better understand their point of view. It’s not anything that’s been brought to my attention. We’re in a diverse society. It sadly takes a long time for things to change. If there’s anything I can do to make the situation better, I’d certainly be happy to do it,” he said on Tuesday.

Selectman Maria Napier was shocked upon hearing of the news: “It’s a horribly unfortunate incident. I’m loathe to think it still happens. It absolutely does need addressing.”

Ms. Napier said she did not recall similar incidents while she was a Board of Education member from 1997-99.

“I don’t think the schools ignore it. If they are aware of other situations, I’m sure they’ve dealt with it,” she said.

Ann McDonald of Lynlee Lane, who taught at Our Lady of Fatima School for 16 years, said, “How horrid. I’m very surprised and alarmed by it. In a place that’s so privileged and educated, it’s a shame. At Fatima, we took pride that we could pre-empt this sort of thing. We would spot it in the playground and stop it in time. It definitely goes on. But I don’t imagine that it’s just Wilton.”

Additional reporting by Ken Mastro.