

Mobile classroom promotes cultural respect

Newmarket Era

York Region civic leaders welcomed and applauded a new human rights and social justice initiative, as the Tour For Humanity, a high-tech, 30-seat classroom on wheels, rolled out on its inaugural journey in Newmarket.

The self-contained, fully accessible \$1-million retrofitted 42-foot recreational vehicle is an initiative of Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies.

Designed as a mobile tolerance education centre, the vehicle and its facilitators will bring the centre's programming to Ontario schools and communities, an audience at the region's administration facility heard.

Centre president and CEO Avi Benlolo joined York Region chairperson and CEO Bill Fisch to launch the tour, which is mandated to inspire and empower participants to raise their voices and take action against hatred and intolerance.

Mr. Benlolo said he embraced the opportunity to launch the program in York Region, hoping it will be instrumental in addressing some of the more serious issues of racism, including a spate of swastikas which appeared in various locations throughout the region, including a Richmond Hill golf course, in the past few months.

"This initiative is designed to bring programs on the Holocaust, genocide and heroes to students and communities across Ontario and we are so pleased with the interest shown in this program by regional leaders," he said. "In the end, we are simply hoping to bring a message of tolerance and respect and to help make the world a better place for everyone."

The region is honoured to host the launch, Mr. Fisch said.

It is important to educate young people about injustice and inhumanity as a means to abolish hatred and racism, tour donor Howard Meyer, a child of Holocaust survivors, said.

"There's no reason for future generations to hate each other," Mr. Meyer said.

Fellow tour supporter Fred Leitner explained while his mother survived Nazi atrocities, her entire family perished in gas chambers.

"Their only crime was being Jewish," he said. "If we don't learn from the past, we're condemned to repeat it."

Attendees were given an onboard demonstration of the 12-screen video wall, which will focus on historical Canadian events and, by 2014, presentations on the Holocaust, universal genocide and real world heroes, including Martin Luther King Jr., Helen Keller, Ghandi and Mr. Wiesenthal.

Participants will each have a linked computer tablet on which to provide opinions.

The touring classroom is a terrific concept, Aurora Mayor Geoff Dawe said.

York Region Police Chief Eric Jolliffe agreed, noting his personnel train and work with the centre in the area of hate crimes.

"This program helps all our communities and us," he said. "We're in the business of ensuring tolerance in the community."

The tour is timely, he added. By 2030, the region will have 1.5 million residents, 1 million of whom will have been born outside of Canada.

"It's important to ensure we understand where each person comes from and what they stand for," Chief Jolliffe said. "York Region is one of the safest communities for its size. We work diligently to promote inclusiveness and tolerance and bring communities together. We pride ourselves on that."

Supported by private donations and a \$500,000 Trillium grant, the tour will visit any public, Catholic or private school requesting it.



Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies president and CEO Avi Benlolo welcomed dignitaries aboard the Tour for Humanity Bus today. The educational initiative is a fully self-contained, technologically-advanced tolerance education center designed to address issues of human rights and social justice.