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Students get a lesson in social justice and heroism on a bus

Tour for Humanity travels from Kenora to Windsor opening young eyes about Canada's history, good and bad.



Hannah Rose (centre) and her peers, Grade 7 students from St. Mary Catholic School, attended a Tour for Humanity session, which educates on Canadian issues including residential schools. (MELISSA RENWICK / TORONTO STAR)

By [ANDREA GORDON](#) Education Reporter

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Thirty Grade 7 students stare silently at the haunting history lesson unfolding before their eyes. Light from the giant video screen reflects off their sombre faces. So does shock, at the sights and sounds from some of mankind's — and Canada's — darkest moments.

They see black-and-white footage of gaunt prisoners behind the barbed wire of concentration camps. Images of a crowded ship carrying 900 Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazis, turned away by the Canadian government. Anti-Japanese signs from the Second World War. Indigenous children lined up in residential schools they were forced to attend after being ripped away from their families.

Behind the students seated in rows of folding seats, the words “hope,” “respect” and “dignity” line the wall above portraits of Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Anne Frank — because horror can also bring hope when ordinary people fight against it.

“It's going to take awhile for me to take in everything I saw,” says Cassandra Collura, 12, after the hour-long Tour for Humanity session held in a one-of-a-kind mobile classroom. “I had never imagined it to be that bad.”

But Cassandra believes it's important for students to know about the bleakest parts of history.

“I think the main message is to not discriminate and why we should stand up to it.”

The refurbished RV that Cassandra and her classmates from St. Mary Catholic School in Nobleton climbed aboard in November is an unlikely place for a searing history lesson on human rights and tolerance.

But the vehicle, which converts into a state-of-the-art theatre when parked, is how the Toronto non-profit Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre for Holocaust Studies is taking its social-justice message to schools across Ontario.



Since it was launched three years ago, the tour has delivered its interactive programs, tailored to age, to more than 50,000 students at 315 schools. (MELISSA RENWICK)

The mobile classroom, accommodating up to 180 students a day from Kenora to Windsor, is much more than a travelling classroom.

It's also "a safe space" away from the normal routine, says Daniella Lurion, who facilitated the sessions at St. Mary and has been teaching the programs for more than two years.

Amid blaring headlines about hate, bigotry and terrorism, the tour is in huge demand as a way to tackle complex subject matter and to show kids how they can use their voices to fight back.

Tour for Humanity runs five days a week from September through June.

"The bottom line is everybody faces discrimination in their own way or has been targeted for who they are," says Lurion. "That's something any kid understands whether they are 8 or 18."

Since it was launched three years ago, the tour has delivered its interactive programs, tailored to age, to more than 50,000 students at 315 schools. Schools typically pay \$500 for the day — covering half the organization's costs — for up to six classes.

Kids arrive on the bus with a huge range of knowledge, says Lurion, but the session is only meant to be a starting point and provide a foundation. Teachers are provided with preparation and debriefing material.

The sweeping journey through history and incorporating contemporary issues such as online bullying and racism via social media, has an impact.

"Even when they're quiet, you can see it in their eyes," says Lurion.

What's going on in the news shows up on the bus. She and her teaching colleague have noticed a shift in kids' fears in the last three months of intensive U.S. election coverage.

"Is World War Three going to happen?" is a common question. And from some newcomer students, "are we going to be deported?"

The effect of the news underlines why it's so critical to teach youth how to stand up for what they believe in and that change is possible, starting in their own backyard, she says.

Almost two of every three hate crimes based on race, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation are committed by people ages 12 to 24, she tells the Grade 7 students.

"These are your peers, which is why it's so important to talk about this."

Leaders such as Nelson Mandela or Pakistani education activist Malala Yousafzai weren't born heroes. "They saw something worth fighting for."

Students from St. Mary said that while troubling, the experience was eye-opening.



Domenic Ruso had no idea that in 1939, Canada was among countries that refused entry to Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazis aboard the transatlantic liner St. Louis.

Lauren Ceolin was taken aback to hear the last residential school in Canada didn't close until 20 years ago. And Nicolas Simone was shocked Japanese-Canadians were sent to internment camps during the Second World War.

"I never knew my home country would do that to people," said Nicolas, 12. "I thought Canada was a warm place to stay . . . just hearing how they discriminated against Japanese people, I couldn't believe it."

But the students also agreed it's something everyone needs to learn.

"As kids you have to learn from what you do wrong," says Nicolas. "You've got to learn from it and not do it again. That's what I think Canada is trying to do as we grow."

Lurion wants kids to start thinking critically.

"I hope that even one student leaves the bus and either does something positive, or questions something they see or hear," she adds. "That's where it begins. That's the first step to change."