

Residents urge council to take action against racism in HH



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By Nate Smelle

Hastings Highlands council received a delegation at their Dec. 2 meeting from Reverend Marilyn Zehr and Erin Morlock of the Maynooth-Madawaska Pastoral Charge of the United Church of Canada. Drawing attention to a hateful act of vandalism which took place in the municipality on Aug. 1, Zehr and Morlock called on council to move forward with a plan of action to deal with racism and discrimination in the community.

Establishing common ground in a shared hope for a more inclusive and healthier community, Zehr pointed out how everyone wants to live in a community where they are safe, and where they feel a sense of belonging. By using phrases in the municipality's strategic plan such as "We care," "We are all in this together," and "Welcome home," Zehr said council acknowledges the value of this kind of hope in their effort to become an "enviable community where people want to live and work and play." Unfortunately, in spite of these shared hopes and the municipality's goals, she said people in the community continue to do things to hurt others.

Explaining why they decided to take a stand against racism, and, how they ended up bringing their campaign to council, Morlock said "It was quite a summer! All over North America, people of colour and their supporters demonstrated, marched, and called on all people to consider the ways that racism plays a part in the many ways we live and work. Here, in this town, in this place we are a small part of that very large picture."

To show their solidarity with the global anti-racism movement which sprang into action following the public killing of George Floyd by members of the Minneapolis police this summer, Morlock told council that Rev. Zehr and her partner Rev. Svinda Heinrichs painted signs to put up throughout the community that read, "Black Lives Matter," and "United Against Racism." Acknowledging how their church community wanted to make it clear that their congregation supported the anti-racism campaign, she said they decided to put up their own signs bearing the same phrases in front of the church.

Describing the act of hatred that followed, Morlock explained how "the signs were defaced with a malicious, hateful symbol - a pink Star of David. To understand how hateful that was, we need to remember that the colour pink, and the Star of David were used by Nazis in their concentration camps during World War Two, to single out gays and to identify Jewish people. This spray paint was meant to hurt; to hurt our minister and Reverend Svinda, who are a married lesbian couple, to hurt our Jewish neighbours, to hurt

people of colour, and the LGBTQ2IA community at large."

As the owner/operator of Hay Lake Lodge and a resident of Hastings Highlands, Morlock has recognized "a diversity of people and personalities" in Hastings Highland for sometime now. Speaking to the value of the community's diversity, she said "it's one of the qualities that makes this such a vibrant area and it's increasing all the time. One big reason we have asked to speak to council is our belief that it is at the municipal level that the government is most real " where the rubber hits the road. We feel that governing at this level offers the privilege and opportunity of affecting peoples, everyday lives. Citizens and councils working together makes positive change that much easier."

Zehr told council that she realizes it is not easy to know which "concrete actions" to take in response to hate crimes. Although the incident was taken up with the police, she said they decided to appear before council because "municipalities also have a responsibility to shape policies and communities where there is zero tolerance for discrimination of any kind." While researching ways that the municipality could take action against racism, discrimination, and hate crimes, she said she was excited to discover that there are 82 municipalities across Canada that have already created some version of an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion committee or advisory board.

In order to make the municipality's strategic plan "more concrete," Zehr proposed that council create a diversity and inclusion committee; and, for Hastings Highlands to consider joining the UNESCO-formed, Canadian Coalition of Inclusive Municipalities. Highlighting how the network's strength lies in the shared experience of its 82 member municipalities, she said they are finding ways to improve their practices; promote social inclusion; establish policies to eradicate all forms of racism and discrimination; and, to promote human rights and diversity.

"This increasing diversity in our communities is an asset," Zehr said. "The diversity among us makes us a place where people want to live. It certainly made me want to live here."

Zehr called on council, and all community leaders to find ways to "understand, appreciate, incorporate, and empower all the gifts that this diversity brings to us." To accomplish this, she said "It is up to us to help ask how our programs, policies, and principles are inclusive of all people of good will. It is up to us to recognize that the gifts of diversity will be our strength in promoting a strong and stable sense of belonging for everyone."

Before wrapping up their delegation, Zehr expressed her desire to work with council to "seize this opportunity for creative and positive change through a diversity and inclusion committee." If the municipality had such a committee, she said it would be a valuable and indispensable asset to the concrete realization of your strategic plan, where everyone can truly say they're welcome home, that they know the municipality cares, and that indeed we are all in this together."