

A safe space?



By Nate Smelle

Over the past two months I have received correspondence from the parents of three different children studying at schools in North Hastings, informing me that their child is being bullied. It was upon reading the second letter, that it occurred to me that there was more to this story than I had originally thought.

This moment of realization arrived when it dawned on me that in both instances ? now in all three cases ? the children were being bullied because of their Indigenous heritage or the colour of their skin. Out of fear that speaking out would make things worse for their child at school, on each occasion I was asked by the parents not to publish their letters, or use their names in anything I wrote on the subject. Since receiving the third letter a few weeks ago I have been contemplating how to help these kids overcome the racist hatred in our local schools while respecting their parents' requests.

As I searched for a solution to this dilemma, two separate domestic terrorist attacks south of the border shone a light on the situation here in North Hastings from different angles I had not previously considered.

On May 14, an 18-year-old man planned and carried out the first attack at a grocery store on the east side of Buffalo, New York. As a result of allowing this terrorist's hatred to grow unchecked, 10 innocent people were murdered just because of the colour of their skin.

It wasn't only the lives of the 10 people in Buffalo that were senselessly snuffed out on that day. Also forever stolen was the peace of mind of every single customer and worker in that store who survived the attack. And the infection of ignorance and racist hatred doesn't stop there. From now on, the family and friends of everyone in that store on May 14, and everyone who has ever shopped there for that matter, will be forced to live in fear every time they feel hungry and need to pick up groceries. From now on, the grocery store ? a place we all need to go on a regular basis ? is no longer a safe space for these individuals. Imagine what that must feel like the next time you are pushing your cart through the aisles of your favourite grocery store.

Ten days later, on the morning of May 24, another 18-year-old man stormed into Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas and murdered 19 defenceless children and three adults. Again, not only were the lives of these 22 individuals selfishly stolen, the lives of the 18 others injured, along with every single student, teacher, education assistant, custodian, administrative staff member in the school that day, as well as their family and friends has forever been changed.

Will any of these individuals ever enjoy the freedom of feeling safe to go to school or go grocery shopping again?

Uvalde is home to nearly 16,000 people. Of the 1,100 students enrolled in the school district where Robb Elementary School is located, almost 80 per cent come from economically disadvantaged families. Living in a small town such as those found throughout North Hastings, we share similar demographics with the people of Uvalde, Texas. Likewise, we are not immune to the violence that inevitably stems from turning a blind eye to the racism, ignorance, and hatred in our schools and communities. That is why it is imperative for us as adults to remember that kids are not born racist. Over time, they learn to hate others from their parents and those they look up to. When they hear their parents use racial slurs, or see public figures espouse racist ideals for their own political gain, like a sponge they soak in that seed of hatred and it becomes part of who they are.

As author Barbara Coloroso wrote in her book, *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*, "Racist bullying doesn't just happen. Kids have to be taught to be racist before they can engage in racist bullying. Racist bullying takes place in a climate where children are taught to discriminate against a group of people, where differences are seen as bad, and where the common bonds of humanity are not celebrated."

Without the proper guidance from their mentors, this seed of hatred grows within the child and they learn to reject the strength of diversity and embrace the ignorance and hatred they are being taught. As responsible teachers and elders, we are in turn obligated to set a good example for the next generation. When we witness racism flaring up in our schools or our community, it is up to us as individuals to rally together and put it out before it infects our shared future.

Coloroso also points out how shortly after the Columbine High School Massacre in Littleton, Colorado in 1999 "a school shooting where 12 students and one teacher were murdered by two students from the school who had been bullied by their peers" the students who survived the attack called on all students worldwide to take the following pledge:

"As part of my community and my school, I WILL:

" Pledge to be part of the solution.

" Eliminate taunting from my own behaviour.

" Encourage others to do the same.

" Do my part to make my community a safe place by being more sensitive to others.

" Set the example of a caring individual.

" Eliminate profanity toward others from my language.

" Not let my words or actions hurt others ...

... and if others won't become a part of the solution, I WILL."

Although children and youth play a critical role in ending racism and bullying at school, everyone of us must do more to "become a part of the solution" if we desire to make our schools a safe space again for every child.