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Photo of Avi Benlolo

## **A bus tour that teaches tolerance to young people**

By Avi Benlolo

Following the recent terror attacks at the kosher supermarket and the *Charlie Hebdo* offices in Paris, there seems to be a slow but inevitable awakening among western media to the reality of terrorism, and how it is gradually and insidiously infecting democratic societies. I hope this long overdue recognition will lead to an eventual change in the West's response to terror. But I am not holding my breath.

At Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center (FSWC), our work is grounded in the lessons and legacy of the Holocaust, and the understanding that hatred can have tragic and horrific consequences. We cannot wait for the hatred that underlies terrorism to dissipate on its own. We must create the circumstances that foster the opposite of hatred: tolerance, respect, understanding, and a deep and abiding reverence for the values of freedom, democracy and human rights.

This is why we have developed a series of workshops devoted to teaching students and community leaders about the Holocaust, genocide, bullying, leadership and heroes. To bring these workshops beyond the Greater Toronto Area, we built a mobile classroom called the Tour

for Humanity. It was launched at the end of 2013 and has, to date, visited more than 100 elementary and secondary schools, and provided programs to over 50,000 students across Ontario – from Niagara Region to Ottawa and all points in between. Importantly, 99 per cent of respondents surveyed agree the Tour for Humanity is useful in promoting awareness of important issues such as racism, tolerance and human rights

As anti-Semitism continues to rise, the Tour for Humanity provides an alternate viewpoint to impressionable young people. Dorothy Shoichet, one of the Tour for Humanity's major supporters, has noted, "In today's world reality, the Tour for Humanity stands out as one of the most creative and principled ideas for fighting anti-Semitism. In my many years of dealing with anti-Semitism, I have not come across an idea which has more potential for success than this travelling bus, which will target young minds before they are polluted by intolerance and racism."

To my knowledge we are the only organization committed to outreach to diverse populations on this scale. Every day we meet with students from a cross section of the communities that make up our multicultural province – including Mennonites, Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Jews and others – as we deliver content focused on the Holocaust, genocide and heroes to communities eager to hear our message of tolerance and respect for diversity. Our workshop on the Canadian experience, highlighting Canada's less-than-perfect past in dealing with native and immigrant communities, is in high demand.

I am thrilled with the achievements of the Tour for Humanity, and believe its continued success speaks to a profound need for more education on the civic values which define our society and country. The ubiquitous nature of technology has brought our global village closer together, with a resulting clash of values and belief systems. The beliefs of those who would force their ideologies on others through violence and terror have a willing audience. Tour for Humanity is the counterpoint, providing a narrative of optimism, and the conviction that everyone has the potential to make a positive difference in the world.

Like the Nazi ideology that preceded it, terrorism has sparked a global war it cannot win. History has proven time and again that respect, compassion and a profound belief in freedom will always triumph over tyranny and hate. This conviction informs the work of the Tour for Humanity.

As western leaders are drawn unwillingly into a battle they would rather avoid, I remain committed to following the advice of Anne Frank, whose wisdom continues to inspire students in the Tour for Humanity classroom: "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

*Avi Benlolo is president and CEO, Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies.*