



Warehouse of Hope couldn't help others without the help of volunteers
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The Pride crosswalk was defaced again Friday morning with words of hate and profanity — this photo has been edited. (Mike Balsom)

A large gathering of residents was organized Thursday to be held Friday afternoon, to rally support and unity, but when they arrived, they learned the fourth and worst act of vandalism had occurred in time to greet them. (Mike Balsom)

Residents stand strong against hatred Pride Niagara warns hate crimes likely to escalate

Mike Balsom
The Local

About 100 people gathered at Niagara-on-the-Lake's rainbow crosswalk Friday morning to stand in solidarity against the repeated displays of hate at the site.

When they arrived at the corner of Anderson Lane and Mississagua Street, however, they were greeted by yet another act of vandalism to the important symbol of inclusivity. And this fourth time, the hate messages painted on the crosswalk earlier that day were broader and more direct, including death threats and a reference to the Black community via the "BLM" abbreviation.

Old Town resident Suzin

Schiff-Malins mobilized to organize the rally Thursday, after the third incident of vandalism occurred early Sunday morning. That incident followed two prior ones that occurred just days after the installation of the crosswalk in late May.

Town staff mobilized quickly to clean up that damage, and the crosswalk was returned to its original state on Tuesday afternoon.

But Schiff-Malins felt she couldn't just stand by and do nothing. She contacted friends and connections via emails, phone calls and text messages two days later.

"This affects me viscerally," Schiff-Malins told The Local. "It affects my heart, and it

affects my humanity. Watching it continually happen, and just waiting for someone to clean it up, to me that's almost participating in the acceptance of the inevitability of such an act, and I don't want to accept that."

Schiff-Malins and others were impressed with the turnout for the gathering, which was supported by the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake.

"Suzin reached out," said Marah Minor, the town's community engagement and communications coordinator. "She expressed that she and the others wanted to show their support and stand strong together. So we arranged this on quick notice, posted about it on our social

media, and we've had a very good turnout."

The gathering included people of all ages and backgrounds. Many members of the 2SLGBTQAI+ community were there as well as their family members and friends.

George Webber strolled over from his home in the neighbourhood to show his support. "I am blown away by the turnout," said Webber. "This is just from circulating an email. This just shows that there's way more good here than there is bad."

Webber was shocked at the latest defacing of the crosswalk, and that it included a reference to the Black

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Mike Balsom
The Local

Pride Niagara Chair Enzo De Divitis is pleased that the Niagara Regional Police Services are treating the latest vandalism to Niagara-on-the-Lake's rainbow crosswalk as a hate crime.

But to De Divitis, it shouldn't have taken four incidents for that to happen.

"In my mind it definitely was a hate crime from the start," says De Divitis. "If you're not a part of a marginalized community, you

don't see the things that we do. I've seen the body language, heard the comments throughout my life. Others think that kind of stuff doesn't happen here in Niagara. Well, it does."

When the crosswalk at Anderson Lane and Mississagua Street was first vandalized in early June, just days after its installation, De Divitis told The Local that he wasn't at all surprised by the act. On the contrary, he and other members of

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Gathering shows support and unity for Pride community

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Lives Matter movement.

"I don't understand what is motivating this kind of behaviour," he said. "I can't dig into this kind of hatred and vandalism. It's too deep and too dark for me. We all believe that we live in a society that is loving and caring. People just want to lead a life that they're comfortable and happy with. And then this non-

sense comes along."

For Old Town resident Ken Chan, the feeling of disappointment at seeing the latest hate message on the crosswalk was trumped by seeing his friends, neighbours and allies show their support Friday morning.

"It reinforces the strength of this community," insisted Chan. "When we are faced with hate, we are countering that with love and support for

one another. We all recognize that Niagara-on-the-Lake is an inclusive community. We cannot let these kinds of acts deter us from who we are as a community."

Chan said he believes the timing of the latest vandalism attack is symbolic of the escalation of hatred. He is certain that the perpetrator knew very well that the community would be coming together onsite Friday.

"As a former police officer," he added, "I can say that this is now definitely a hate crime. We've seen it happen before where it starts with words and it escalates to physical violence. It is now time for the police to step up and send the message to the community that they are here for us all."

As residents gathered at the intersection, town staff erected pylons and barriers to

block cars from turning onto Anderson Lane.

"Anybody who has a family member who is queer," Schiff-Malins said to the group, "friends who are queer, or co-workers who are queer, which is everybody, should all stand together. Otherwise the message we're giving is that whatever is expected is accepted, and it can't be. And now they've included another group, with BLM on there. So who's next?"

Coun. Maria Mavridis then expressed her pleasure at how many people showed up on such short notice.

"We are one community, and we need to stand together in solidarity," said Mavridis. "What happened this morning is really disheartening. We need to be louder with our message versus this one."

Schiff-Malins then organized the group for a photo along the span of the crosswalk. Some of the supporters opted to lay down on top of the vandalism to signify that they won't stand for such hateful messages.

Speaking to *The Local* later, Mavridis also addressed the inclusion of the BLM reference in the vandal's recent attack.

"When I saw that I thought, 'really?' So you just have hate for everybody?" she remarked. "In my heart, I really don't think it's someone who lives in this town. I don't want to believe it, I really don't."

In an email to *The Local*, town CAO Marnie Cluckie said though these acts hurt, "the town will stand in solidarity against this hatefulness and show that Niagara-on-the-Lake will continue to fight for acceptance, respect

and inclusivity for all people."

She added that seeing the number of people coming together Friday morning was a powerful reminder of the strength of community and NOTL's commitment to respect, acceptance and understanding.

Cluckie said the incident happened sometime before 4 a.m. Friday, and that the Niagara Regional Police Service has been alerted.

An Aug. 4 press release from the NRPS confirms that this latest incident is being investigated as a potential hate-based crime. The legal criteria for a charge under the Hate Propaganda sections of the Criminal Code are specific in scope and done in consultation with the Ministry of the Attorney General. Once the NRPS investigation has concluded, investigators can prepare a report with the consent of the Niagara Crown's Office for submission to the Attorney General of Ontario.

Anyone with information is asked to contact the lead detective at 905-688-4111, option 3, extension 1007730. Anyone who wishes to provide information anonymously is urged to contact Crime Stoppers of Niagara online or at 1-800-222-8477.

Cluckie added that in light of a nearby security camera being blacked out with paint prior to last Sunday's vandalism, the town is exploring other options to protect the community's rainbow crosswalk.

As far as Schiff-Malins is concerned, if another act of vandalism occurs, she and others will be right there, standing in support.

"The only thing we can do is respond to it, to stand together," she added. "We are acting to a bias that is full of hate and discrimination. Can you change people's hearts or minds? Maybe not, but can we at least show support when these things happen? Yes we can. I will do this every single time if I have to."



Suzin Schiff-Malins mobilized Thursday to hold a rally Friday afternoon. (Photos by Mike Balsom)



Coun. Maria Mavridis speaks of her disappointment and her hope that those who are creating such hate messages are not locals.



The Pride crosswalk was defaced again Friday morning with words of hate, and included the Black Lives Matter group.



Town staff clean the crosswalk Tuesday, only to have it vandalized again Friday. (Supplied)



Niagara-on-the-Lake Kinsmen



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In partnership with Parks Canada




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