

SEIDMAN: ‘Combating hate’ in Sarasota



The panel on “Combating Hatred” at Temple Sinai in Sarasota included, from left: Micah Kubik, executive director of the ACLU of Kansas; Trevor Harvey, president of the NAACP Sarasota branch; Rabbi Samantha Kahn of Temple Sinai; Jarred Wilson, development officer for Equality Florida; clinical psychologist Eddy Regnier; Amani Makarita of the Islamic Society of Sarasota/Bradenton; and moderator Sarah Wertheimer, executive director of Embracing Our Differences. [Herald- Tribune staff photo / Carrie Seidman]

By [Carrie Seidman](#)

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A local panel examines the factors fueling an escalation in hate groups and crimes and seeks solutions

According to the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#), the number of hate groups operating across America grew to a record high last year of 1,020, a roughly 30 percent increase since 2014. In [Florida](#) alone, 75 entities have been documented, espousing philosophies from neo-Nazism and black nationalism to anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim and anti-LGBTQ ideologies.

That the hate exists is nothing new, said members of a panel on [“Combating Hatred,”](#) organized by the National Council of Jewish Women and held Wednesday at Temple Sinai. But a country in upheaval, a lack of education and empathy, and an attitude of tolerance for extreme biases has made for “hospitable conditions for hate,” said Temple Sinai’s rabbi, Samantha Kahn.

“At a time of disruption, that is when hate and extremists are able to be ascendant,” agreed Micah Kubik, executive director of the [ACLU of Florida](#). “All we are seeing

is the growth and amplification of things that were under the rocks, now coming up to the surface and staying.”

The panel — which also included a clinical psychologist, a member of the [Islamic Society](#), and representatives from the [NAACP](#), [Equality Florida](#) and the nonprofit [Embracing Our Differences](#) — examined the factors fueling the increase in extremism and violence, discussed what can be done to combat it, and shared local organizations’ advocacy and outreach efforts.

Hate comes from an inability to see past our differences or an unwillingness to consider our shared commonalities, said Jared Wilson, development officer for the statewide LGBTQ advocacy organization, Equality Florida. It blinds reason, empowers fear and “ruins a person’s heart before it ever affects the person they’re hating,” said Amani Makarita, a leader in the local Muslim community.

“It has nothing to do with dislike,” Makarita said. “You can not like something, but still accept it. Hating something, you come to feel that you don’t want to deal with it at all, or you want to destroy it.”

Trevor Harvey, president of the Sarasota branch of the NAACP, said the failure of “certain officials” (“I’m trying to be politically correct here”) to condemn recent hate crimes has made it “open season” for extremists emboldened by the unspoken permission.

“Until we see some changes in Washington, D.C., it will be a struggle for us to put a dent in the extremism and hatred,” he said. “But what we can do as individually and as a community is to say we’re going to pick the ball up and make the change here.”

While hatred will never be eradicated, Kubik said, “what we can do over time is make it so that the laws, the government and the big social forces are not imposing policies that say that, based on who you are or where you come from or who you love, that your life chances are going to be different.”

The ACLU’s focus is on securing every person’s Constitutional rights, Kubik said. For the NAACP, the attention is on preventing disenfranchisement, such as the organization’s current effort to eliminate conditions imposed on the restoration of former felon’s voting rights under [Amendment 4](#).

Equality Florida wants to “drag the rest of the South along with us” by insuring passage of the [Florida Competitive Workforce Act](#) barring discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, Wilson said.

But for Kahn, response to the current climate has been focused more on protection than advocacy, things like shoring up the synagogue's security systems and announcing exits before prayer services.

“While as someone new to the area, it's wonderful to hear about all this work, and while I hope to become your partner and ally, I see my position as very different,” she said. “My job is to give voice to all the people who have identities that make them targets and to protect everyone.”

Having a quality public education system that is sufficiently “funded, represents a diversity of ethnic groups and where teachers are paid properly,” is critical to exposing children to cultural diversity, equality, empathy and acceptance, said clinical psychologist Eddy Regnier, a member of the [Florida Council on the Status of Black Men and Boys](#).

Panel moderator Sarah Wertheimer, executive director of Embracing Our Differences, a nonprofit that uses the power of art to expand acceptance of diversity, said her organization began with the goal of making the world a kinder place. When that seemed unmanageably large, the scope was narrowed to the local community, and then again, to children.

The toughest challenge is to engage those who may not be, as Kubik put it, “hardcore haters,” but are simply passive or indifferent. Regnier suggested the first step must be to take a critical look at oneself.

“The first thing I had to do was examine my own biases, feelings and hatreds,” he said. “I discovered a lot of things I didn't like about myself. And one of the things I changed was tolerance. We have to start with ourselves first, and then maybe one other person. And if we can affect just a few, perhaps we can bring this hatred to subside.”

“It really boils down to love,” Harvey added. “As long as we are continuing to show love and compassion and to be open, maybe one day they are going to have an epiphany moment and change.”

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