



THE LAWRENCEVILLE SCHOOL 2019-2020

January 3, 2020

Dear Members of the Lawrenceville Community,

I want to wish each and every one of you a happy and auspicious start to 2020. Our campus has been quiet these past two weeks, but the return of students today breathes an infectious energy back into the place, and off we go!

As we begin a new year, with hopes and prayers for peace and good will, I feel compelled to comment on the recent, awful spate of anti-Semitic violence in the New York/New Jersey region. Just as I have written and spoken out in response to other tragic incidents in the recent past, including the horrific attacks on Christians in Sri Lanka, on Jews at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, and on Muslims in New Zealand, I have been deeply struck by the recent incidents so close to home.

The recent murderous attack on a kosher market in Jersey City, New Jersey and the attack on a Rabbi's home in Monsey, New York are just two examples. Sometimes called "history's oldest hatred," anti-Semitism continues to re-emerge with frightening regularity, with anti-Semitic incidents in New York City alone up over twenty percent in the past year, according to a recent Washington Post article. And as reported in The New York Times, "Of 421 hate crimes reported in New York City in 2019, more than half were directed at Jews, according to police crime data," though they represent a small minority of the City population.

General trends cited by the FBI indicate a deeply unsettling rise in hate crimes nationally in recent years, especially crimes that involve physical assaults. In light of recent events, even with increased police presence, Jewish communities are obviously deeply shaken, with many professing a heightened reluctance to display any outward signs or wear articles of clothing that might indicate their faith. Such fear is understandable, and in truth, this fear and mistrust diminishes all of us in every community, everywhere. It violates the ideals of personal freedoms, community values, and open-minded tolerance that we all cherish in this country, ideals that have made us a beacon of hope and a haven for the persecuted since our founding.

It is easy to feel somewhat helpless at these times. How does one counter senseless violence and irrational enmity? I was moved to read the other day an account of one meaningful gesture that galvanized an entire community some years ago in Billings, Montana. In reaction to a series of anti-Semitic acts targeting Jewish homes displaying a menorah during the festival of Hanukkah, the local sheriff and a newspaper editor began distributing paper cutouts of menorahs.



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Thousands of non-Jewish households responded immediately, and images of menorahs appeared in windows throughout the city. The message of support and the rejection of hatred was clear and overwhelming.

At these moments, when I search in our more immediate context for meaningful gestures in the face of brute ignorance, I return to our mission and what we do every day in our Houses and around our Harkness tables. I tried to convey precisely this message in comments I made to our community just over a year ago:

“...the practice of civil discourse around the Harkness table and in the Harkness classroom is profoundly important. This daily Lawrenceville exercise in careful, respectful listening, this expectation that all voices have a right to be heard, is a fundamental value of our democracy, enshrined in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution; it is the best protection of our concept of citizenship and of our free and open society. (...) And we must remind ourselves that these freedoms do not persist on their own, and that an erosion is inevitable if we do not work at these freedoms: practice them here at Lawrenceville around our wooden tables, and actively defend them out in the world.”

Our students learn here, during their most formative years, that a highly diverse community such as ours, however imperfect, can live together respectfully, even lovingly. Having seen it work here, our graduates head out into the world with a certain faith in humanity and a sense of purpose. This I find most heartening. As the New Year begins, and as our students return, I want to remind all of our Jewish families, and in truth any family experiencing any form of bias due to their faith, that Lawrenceville seeks to live up to the highest ideals of integrity and respect, and to embrace all members of this community.

Sincerely,

Stephen S. Murray H'55 '65 '16 P'16 '21
The Shelby Cullom Davis '26 Head Master