

Parks, Tri-District Student Leadership Conference SHINE SPOTLIGHT ON HATE CRIMES

BY LISA BIELMEIER

Orleans/Niagara BOCES Public Relations Director Niagara Wheatfield resident and Town of Niagara Councilman Johnny Parks recently stood in front of student representatives from Niagara Falls, Niagara Wheatfield and North Tonawanda and their district leaders. The event was part of a larger initiative started by the Niagara Falls and North Tonawanda districts aimed at bringing together students from varied backgrounds. Parks was there to share with students his experience growing up in the LaSalle area and the racial hate crime that was perpetrated against his family.



Town of Niagara Councilman Johnny Parks answers student questions.

On May 14, 2022 a mass shooting occurred at a Tops Friendly Markets in Buffalo. Ten people were murdered and three injured that day in a racially motivated attack. The incident shook the nation – and particularly the Western New York area – at its core. Two days later, Parks, while on his way back home from the local Tim Hortons before heading to work, spotted racist and violent graffiti on his fence.

“It was horrible,” Parks said. “I felt like I let my family down and could not protect them.”

Considering how tight-knit his neighborhood is, he and his family could not imagine who would have vandalized his fence. His children posted what happened to their family on social media. There were thousands of views and the story made the national news since many of the media outlets were in town to cover the shooting that happened over the weekend.

After the police, Niagara County Sheriff’s Office and the FBI did their investigation, they gave the Parks family permission to clean up the fence.

What happened next was truly heartwarming, as the community came together to help and support them. Family, friends and

neighbors called to see if they were OK. Niagara Wheatfield Superintendent Daniel Ljiljanich was one of the first people on the scene and asked if there was anything the district could do.

“My kids went to Niagara Wheatfield schools and I will never forget Mr. Ljiljanich walking up my driveway with refreshments and offering assistance. I was at a loss for words,” Parks said.

He also received a call from the local Home Depot, which offered to replace his fence for free.

“I love Home Depot,” Parks said. “I have to say not all heroes wear capes. In my case, they wore tool belts. They even delivered food. It was incredible.”

Law enforcement made an arrest thanks to a security camera, and one of the Parks’ neighbors was arrested and sentenced to seven years in jail.

“I knew who he was,” Parks said. “He often would walk his dog by my house and let the dog do his business on my lawn. I asked him nicely to stop and posted a sign. He was very angry when I did that.”

With GoFundMe donations, Parks used the money to hold a unity day in the park next to his

home. There was food and drinks and a DJ.

“We were so heartbroken and disgusted by what had happened, and to have all that support made us feel loved,” Parks said. “We wanted to bring everyone together to thank them for the support.”

When Ljiljanich invited Parks to speak to the students, he gladly accepted. After being given a traditional Haudenosaunee welcome by student Aiden Phillips, Parks not only talked about the incident, but his life growing up as a person of color, and the challenges he and his family faced growing up.

“My mother was a single parent and she was raising three children,” Parks said. “We were on welfare, but she did an outstanding job raising us and living within our means. We were living hand to mouth and she made sure every Sunday we had a good meal. We were lucky to have free lunches at school, and many times I would trade doing homework for part of other students’ lunches. We all worked for anything extra we wanted or needed, so my mother wouldn’t have to dip into her pocketbook. She made it clear that we were to keep away

from the local drug dealers who drove around in their flashy cars and waved money around. That was not the life she wanted for us. She ran a very tight ship.”

Parks attended LaSalle High School and went out for the football, baseball and basketball teams. It was made clear to him that the color of his skin was going to keep him from advancing on the sports teams. When Parks told his school adviser what was happening, he was told, “That is how life goes, be prepared.”

The adviser made sure to assist him by picking him up and taking him to school and telling the lunch ladies to take good care of him.

Parks said he counts himself fortunate that the basketball coach also decided to mentor him to be a coach and taught him how to motivate the players. It is a skill that has helped him be successful in his life.

“I believe in paying it back,” Parks said. “I have spent 25 years coaching modified football at Niagara Wheatfield (NWAA), coaching Little League and refereeing at the Special Olympics.”

As he shared the challenges he faced throughout his life, you could tell it made an impact on the students and they were visibly moved. After his talk, students from the various high schools came together and met in small groups to talk about what they had heard – and come up with goals in their schools to avoid this sort of hurtful and hateful behavior.

Ljiljanich said he and the rest of the administrators hope the day’s lesson will reverberate for the rest of their lives.

“Hatred and violence in any form threatens the values of our community and our schools,” he said. “It is our job as educators to look out for the physical safety and mental well-being of all our students and to let everyone in our district know that it will never be tolerated. Our hope with Mr. Parks sharing his story is that it will help connect our students and give them a forum to reflect on their own experiences and learn from others. Through collaborative problem-solving, they can make their communities a better place.”

Help Lew-Port Builders Club ‘Spread the Love’



BY BRUNO SCRUFARI

Builders Club Secretary

Lew-Port Builders Club is sponsoring the FeedMore WNY “Spread the Love” Peanut Butter Drive from Feb. 12-29.

Logan Morris, a seventh-grade Builders Club volunteer, suggested this project. He told the other club members, “This is something I can do to help me get my black belt in Tae Kwon Do.”

The Builders Club members jumped right in to help Logan accomplish his goal! They immediately researched FeedMore



Logan Morris with peanut butter jars. • Students working on the FeedMore “Spread the Love” peanut butter drive include Audrey Drahms, Isabella Jackson, Logan Morris, Anisha Singh and Bruno Scrufari. (Submitted photos)

WNY and discovered it is a charity whose mission is to feed more people in Western New York.

FeedMore WNY was created in 2019 from the merger of Meals on Wheels and the Food Bank. They offer many important programs and services, including community meal services, nutrition workshops, free cooking classes, food pantries, soup kitchens, mobile farm markets, and more. They also have special events like “Sweet Expectations,” “Rock Out

Hunger,” “Food 2 Families” and “Spread the Love.”

Builders Club is proud to be a part of the “Spread the Love” peanut butter drive, which collects protein-packed peanut butter, which is always in high demand at the food pantries and soup kitchens. Please help us support this great cause by bringing jars of peanut butter to the Lew-Port Middle School. They can be dropped off at the main entrance. Thank you for your support.

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