

After students felt threatened during spirit week, Pasadena volunteers color Chesapeake High with positive messages for Unity Day



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The temperature was dropping in Pasadena Tuesday evening as volunteers with the group One Pasadena: Addressing Racism set out to decorate the sidewalk in front of Chesapeake High School with messages promoting inclusivity.

Michael Gendel, 80, scrawled “hate hurts the hater” in bright blue chalk.

“I’m angry, and this is cathartic,” he said.

Dec. 8 was Unity Day in Anne Arundel County Public Schools, and members of the group One Pasadena: Addressing Racism decorated the school’s sidewalk in advance with supportive messages for the LGBTQ+ community and Black Lives Matter.

The school system started Project Unity in 2018, designating days throughout the year when schools are asked to show their commitment to fostering an inclusive and bully-free environment, according to the system’s website. This year there are four days associated with the project, and students are dismissed early so staff can participate in professional development.

Jeremy Browning of the LGBTQ+ advocacy group Annapolis Pride said he worries about the safety and comfort of students in Pasadena after reported harassment during a spirit week event earlier this year, and after fliers promoting the school’s Gender-Sexuality Alliance Club were recently torn down.

Schools need to be a safe place for LGBTQ+ students, Browning said.

Annapolis Pride chair Joe Toolan grew up in Pasadena and attended Chesapeake Middle School. He said as a queer man he does not feel as comfortable in Pasadena as he does other places, and believes the community needs to start showing its support for LGBTQ+ students.

In an Oct. 21 letter to parents, principal John Yore wrote that he had been fielding concerns from community members regarding the display of an LGBTQ+ pride flag and a Black Lives Matter flag next to American and Maryland flags. He said the display of those flags is in line with a resolution supporting social justice approved by the school board via its policy for safe and inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ students. Yore addressed spirit week as well, saying the way some students expressed themselves made others uncomfortable. He apologized, saying no student should feel uncomfortable during spirit week, which is supposed to unify the school.

“As a principal, I have conveyed several non-negotiables throughout my career to my supervisors and my community. I have only ever wanted to work in a place where every interaction is respectful, without exception. I have failed in this goal for more than three decades, but I still believe it can be achieved,” he wrote.

In the letter Yore also said he has received complaints from parents about policies regarding the use of bathroom facilities. He directed parents to guidelines which have been in place in Anne Arundel County Public Schools since 2016, the year the U.S. Department of Education and the Justice Department directed schools to allow transgender students to use the bathroom and locker room that corresponds to their gender identity.

Browning said he is happy to see those policies working as intended, removing any doubt about what is allowed and protected in the Anne Arundel County Public School system. More vocal and visual support from the public would also help make Pasadena a more welcoming place, he said.

Debi Jasen is a member of One Pasadena and helped draw messages on the sidewalk Tuesday. She said even if students didn't hear the hateful words used by some students during spirit week, knowing that it happened affects them.

"They have the support of the community," she said. "We stand against hatred and bias in this community."

Yore supported the sidewalk chalking, saying it is imperative that the school create a culture in which all feel valued.

With rain in the forecast for this weekend, it isn't clear how long the sidewalk messages will last.

"The priority is imprinting this message on our hearts," Yore said. "Even after the rains wash it away, it is the message we live here at Chesapeake."