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Candlelighting 8:19; Havdalah 9:28

One Dollar

THE DISTRICT PAGE

Fighting hate

One man's crusade for right

by Lynne Meredith Cohn
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When Eric J. Ellman noticed swastikas in black marker on news boxes and light posts in downtown Washington, D.C., he was enraged — as an American and particularly as a Jew.

Swastikas and SS symbols are “not something we should see; it didn’t make sense for swastikas to be in our capital,” said the 28-year-old lobbyist. Especially outrageous, he noted, were the swastikas in Lafayette Park across the street from the White House.

Since no one seemed to be cleaning up the graffiti, Ellman took matters into his own hands. Starting about two months ago, he designed and paid for stickers to be printed at Staples in Bethesda, Md., that read: “We are all the same — stop hate.”

Ellman and friend Carrie Livingston routinely affix these creations over the black markings. Since beginning the clean-up effort, the two have replaced nearly 100 swastikas and SS symbols with stickers.

Some of the signs peeled off in the rain. Some appear to have been removed by hand, Ellman noted. But he continues the anti-hate crusade.

While graffiti is “against the law,” police officers must receive a complaint from the owner of the defaced property before they can take action, according to Officer Robert Garisto in the public information office of the D.C. Police Department. To make an arrest, a police officer must witness the defacing, he noted.

“It is very difficult to make an arrest on something like that,” Garisto said. “We will do whatever we can to stop it.” Garisto knew nothing about the identity of the perpetrator, but Garisto said that if such information had been obtained, it would not be made public under the auspices of a confidential investigation.

Although unconfirmed, the perpetrator who has been darkening D.C. with swastikas and SS symbols in black marker for at least a year is thought to be a Greek-American homeless man who goes by the name of Zeus and frequently lives in Lafayette Park, according to David C. Friedman, regional director of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL).

In past arrests for “similar acts,” Friedman said, “Zeus” alleged that his motive behind the markings was not antisemitic. Supposedly, the man believes the swastika is an ancient symbol associated with nature worship, and the SS symbol denotes lightening rods rather than the Nazi regime, Friedman said. “Zeus”



Eric Ellman replaces antisemitic graffiti with stickers that urge “Stop Hate.”

Photo by Caldwell N. Dugan

alleged that both symbols were part of nature worship practiced in his homeland, Friedman noted.

The ADL launched two clean-up campaigns — one 18 months ago and another on April 28 (Yom Ha’Atzmaut) in conjunction with the Points of Light Foundation. Both efforts were “symbolic,” Friedman said, “to alert people to the problem and that they can do something about it.”

The D.C. government reportedly has no money in its budget for graffiti clean-up, Friedman said. But leaving the markings on D.C. property “creates more and more the impression in the minds of people who see this that it is acceptable or pervasive This is not something that is trivial or can be ignored,” Friedman said.

When the markings first appeared, Friedman said there was “very little antisemitic, racist or homophobic graffiti” in the District. Since that time, ADL has received reports of an “enormous upsurge of these incidents downtown,” Friedman noted.

Despite the personal clean-up campaign Ellman has undertaken, he has not contacted the police department or city officials about the swastikas. He says he was “quite nervous at first” that someone would stop him from fastening the stickers on city property — he even thought he might be cited for defacing property.

But Ellman vows that he’s “willing to risk a ticket” to stop hate.

“I thought people would have stopped me,” he said, either to prevent him from covering the markings or ask what he was doing. But Ellman reports that no one said a word.

“People have come to accept swastikas being there,” he said. The swastika symbol is particularly offensive as “the ultimate symbol of hate for Jews all over the world and for all people,” he noted. “There is no reason to have them in such a forward-thinking city as Washington.”

Whether or not Ellman re-
See ELLMAN, page 22

ELLMAN

From page 4

mains alone in his efforts to rid the city of graffiti, he considers the results a success because “vigilance is the price of freedom,” he said.

A New Rochelle, N.Y., native who has served on the Friendship Heights, Md., Village Council since 1989, Ellman is particularly passionate about hate crimes and gun control. He sits on the board of directors for Marylanders Against Hand Gun Abuse and vows adamantly that hate crimes “are something that doesn’t need to exist. I’ll do whatever I can to make the world a more hospitable place,” he said.

Ellman has lived in metropolitan Washington since 1984 when he began his undergraduate studies at American University. Now he works as the associate attorney and manager of government relations for the Direct Selling Association, representing sales firms like Avon, Mary Kay Cosmetics and Tupperware. Ellman said he has been active

in combating hate crimes for a while.

In 1991 after noticing a flag bearing a swastika flying from a window in his apartment building, Ellman wrote a letter to the tenant from the Village Council and asked for the flag to be removed. Two days later it was gone.

In the early 1990s, Ellman said he was the “leading fighter” on the council against a proposal to erect a Christmas tree in the village center. Ellman said he had established a “pretty good track record of First Amendment protection.”

Ellman was recently re-elected to a fourth term on the council and last year ran unsuccessfully for the Maryland legislature. A politically active Democrat, Ellman describes his Jewish involvement as “minimal.”

Raised Reform, Ellman celebrated his bar mitzvah and has plans to be married in October by a Reform rabbi. But other than participating in an ADL fund raiser last spring, he said his Jewish-oriented activities are few. ■