

Israel Truth Week fights 'obvious lies'

Cara Stern, Staff Reporter, Monday, March 18, 2013

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Mark Vandermaas speaking at the Israel Truth Week conference [David Strutt photo]

Fighting anti-Israel "radicalism" isn't just for Jews – everybody must support Jewish students on campus, says Mark Vandermaas, a civil rights activist and founder of Israel Truth Week, which has been holding events in several Canadian cities this month.

"We're sending a message to Jewish students and their families that they're not alone," Vandermaas said.

He uses the term "week" loosely when referring to his campaign, which is in its second year.

A two-day conference took place in Hamilton, Ont., on March 5 and 6 featuring 21 speakers whom Vandermaas described as "local knowledge experts," including human rights advocate Majed El Shafie, who helps rescues people who are persecuted based on their faith.

In the week after the conference, March 11 to 15, the right-leaning Canadian Patriotic Society (CPS) held daily two-hour vigils at York University. There was also a student-run event at Ryerson University organized by the Ryerson Israeli Student Association and

Ryerson Campus Conservatives.

The week of vigils at York came one week after Israeli Apartheid Week (IAW) took place on the school's main campus.

CPS member Sharon Isac said IAW inspired her to become involved in Israel Truth Week.

"Even as an ordinary... citizen, not of Jewish descent or of any religious faith, I take great offence in being lied to and feel shame in seeing the obvious lies and de-legitimization of a sovereign state that has existed for more than 60 years," said Isac, who is Japanese-Canadian.

Although Vandermaas' family is not Jewish, his father escaped from a Nazi war camp during the German occupation of Holland, he said.

His interest in pro-Israel activism grew out of his criticism of how police handled protests that erupted in Caledonia, Ont., in 2006, when aboriginals demonstrated for nearly a year against a construction site they said was on native land. He says anti-Israel groups were supporting what he described as the protesters' "lawlessness" there.

The final straw, he said, was when he heard about an event celebrating Israeli culture at the University of Western Ontario that was shut down by anti-Israel protesters. He decided something needed to be done.

Vandermaas said this year's Israel Truth Week was "light years ahead" of the inaugural version. Only 50 people attended last year's one-day conference, though he noted that it was put together with very short notice. This year, however, about 200 people attended over two days.

But Vandermaas said he's not concerned about numbers. He considers the campaign a success, because it has attracted enough people that it could take on a life of its own even if he were no longer involved. As well, he said, it has helped him make several valuable connections, such as Rabbi Jonathan Hausman in Boston, who ran a panel discussion there this year.

Additionally, conference organizers raised about \$14,000 this for Alyn Hospital, a pediatric and adolescent rehab facility in Jerusalem.

He said he hopes Israel Truth Week will continue to grow.

"The thing to remember is that Israeli Apartheid Week is about attacking values. Israel is a proxy for all of the traditional liberal values that we in the West hold dear," he said. "We have to defend those values whether those victims are in Israel or here."

Isac agreed, saying the CPS considers it a matter of upholding democratic values and principles.

"Unless we are prepared to take a stand and defend them vigorously, with our lives if necessary, we are in danger of losing them," she said.