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LOCAL

Florida anti-Semitic incidents declining, audit claims

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While on her usual fitness walk around her Boca Raton neighborhood, 62-year-old Cindy Gitlitz crossed paths with bigotry, and the encounter left her shaken.

She and a friend had stopped for a break, when they saw the anti-Semitic slur scratched on a newspaper-vending box.

"It was terrible ... we were horrified," she said. "We were shocked that this still happens in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood. I personally have had very little incidents of anti-Semitism in my lifetime, so this was totally unexpected."

Despite Gitlitz's unsettling encounter, the num-

ber of anti-Semitic incidents in Florida declined 29 percent in 2007, according to the Anti-Defamation League's annual Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents.

Moreover, it's the second consecutive decline in Florida and third consecutive decline nationwide.

ADL's Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents reported a total of 127 anti-Semitic incidents in Florida, down from 179 incidents in 2006, and 1,357 anti-Semitic incidents in the United States in 2007, down 10 percent from 1,554 incidents reported in 2006 across the country. Florida also continued to rank as the fourth state in the nation with the highest number of reported anti-

Semitic incidents, the ADL reported.

"The good news is that incidents of anti-Semitism in Florida seem to be declining," Andrew Rosenkranz, ADL Florida regional director, said in a written statement. "The bad news is that anti-Semitism is still embedded in our society and that is unacceptable."

The ADL audit includes information supplied by victims, law enforcement and community leaders, and identifies criminal acts, such as vandalism, violence and threats of violence, as well as non-criminal incidents of harassment and intimidation.

The favorite symbol of choice for anti-Semites,

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A swastika was drawn on a "no swimming" sign at a public lake in Hollywood. Submitted photo

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according to the ADL audit, appears to be the Nazi swastika, which was involved in 14 percent of anti-Semitic incidents reported.

"Someone drew a swastika on the wall of the synagogue a few months ago," said Barry Baitch, who handles part of the security at a Boca Raton synagogue. "One congregant found it and called me. It's sad and disgusting. Hate crimes are just vicious and ugly."

Though Baitch has "experienced very little discrimination on a personal level," he thinks the Jewish community should be more vigilant.

"I honestly feel Jews should be more aware of what's going on," he said. "We react when something happens, and then we let our guard down."

Anti-Semitic incidents in public schools and on college campuses are another disturbing trend, since 13 percent of reported incidents took place in public schools and 10 percent on college campuses throughout Florida.

"It's unfortunate to see so many of our youth victimized by anti-Semitism at such a young age," Barry S. Berg, ADL Florida regional chair, said in a written statement. "The Anti-Defamation League provides support to these young victims, their families and their schools and also offers effective workshops and resources to the schools and college campuses to help reduce anti-Semitism and all forms of hatred and racism."

In fact, Rosenkranz suggests ADL's numerous anti-bias education and diversity classes such as A World of Difference; A

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Workplace of Difference; and a Community of Difference, may have had something to do with the decline in anti-Semitic incidents.

"Hopefully, some of the programs ADL has embarked upon have been successful," he said. "Once a year, we take one dozen college editors from

around country to Israel. We also take high school students, once a year, to Washington, D.C. to learn about tolerance and diversity."

Rosenkranz echoes the need for vigilance.

"Unfortunately, anti-Semitism has been a part of society," he said, "and as long as there is anti-Semitism, or racism, there will be a need for agencies like ADL to react."