



The Children's Holocaust Memorial in Whitwell, Tennessee, was created after students there set out to gather 6 million paper clips in remembrance of the Jews killed during the Holocaust. *AdvanceLocal files*

#### INTERFAITH INSIGHT

## Students remind we must never forget the evil of hatred



**Douglas Kindschi**  
Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute

I first learned about the "Paper Clips Project" from a brief meditation written by Eboo Patel, founder and president of the Interfaith Youth Core, on the tragedy at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. He wrote about a visit in the early 2000s to the Squirrel Hill area of Pittsburgh, where the synagogue is located, and seeing the documentary film "Paper Clips," about students in a small Tennessee town, playing at a local movie theater.

In the town of Whitwell, population 1,600, the middle school was looking for a way to teach about diversity and tolerance. They decided to study the Holocaust despite the fact there were no Catholics, let alone any Jews, living in this nearly 100 percent white, Protestant community. When trying to understand the enormity of 6 million Jews exterminated under Adolf Hitler's rule in Nazi Germany, one student said he had no concept of such a large number.

Learning that people in Norway during World War II wore a paper clip on the lapel as a silent protest against the Nazi occupation, students set off to collect 6 million paper clips. Their project drew attention from around the country, with responses from people such as Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg. The project grew rapidly, with reports published by two German journalists who covered the White House for German papers. Articles in German newspapers and in the Washington Post led to a huge response.

Eventually, nearly 30 million paper clips were sent to this small rural middle school from all over the United States, Germany, Spain and even New Zealand. A suitcase arrived from a German school with letters attached to the paper clips written by students apologizing to Anne Frank.

Holocaust survivors from New York City heard about the project and asked if they could come and visit the town. At the local Methodist Church, they shared their stories of family members who had perished. Students and adults in the community were moved by their reports, as the project of tolerance became a project of understanding and love.

Facing the dilemma of what to do with the overwhelming response to the project, they tried to find a German boxcar from that era used to transport Jews to the death camps. Thanks again to the journalists from Germany, Peter and Dagmar Schroeder, a boxcar was identified and shipped to Whitwell to be used as a memorial. They planned to put 11 million paper clips in the boxcar representing not only the 6 million Jews but also the additional 5 million gypsies, gay people, people with mental or physical disabilities, and others who also were exterminated.

The boxcar that had been an instrument of pain and cruelty now was a car of remembrance. When the memorial was dedicated, the Jewish prayer for the dead, the Kaddish, was said in this town that had no Jews but was now a center for remembering 6 million of them. One person said, "The job of collecting paper clips is over; the job of educating others is never over."

A local artist was inspired by a poem written by Pavel Friedmann, a young person who was held in a ghetto in Theresienstadt and later perished in Auschwitz in 1944, titled "The Butterfly."

"The last, the very last,  
So richly, brightly, dazzlingly yellow.  
Perhaps if the sun's tears would sing against a  
white stone...

"Such, such a yellow  
Is carried lightly 'way up high.  
It went away I'm sure because it wished  
to kiss the world goodbye.

"For seven weeks I've lived in here,  
Penned up inside this ghetto  
But I have found my people here.  
The dandelions call to me  
And the white chestnut candles in the court.  
Only I never saw another butterfly.

"That butterfly was the last one.  
Butterflies don't live in here,  
In the ghetto."

As a part of the boxcar memorial, the artist Linda Pickett created 18 butterflies out of metal, embedded in the walkway around the railcar. The butterfly represents life, as does the number 18 in Hebrew.

As one enters the boxcar memorial, the sign at the entrance reads, "We ask you to pause and reflect on the evil of intolerance and hatred." Following the experience of seeing the 11 million paperclips, the letters to Anne Frank, and other items related to this project, one can only be impressed by how a few students in this small town have given hope to the message that "we must never forget."

Eboo Patel, writing his reflections following the Tree of Life killings, concludes, "I feel shaken to my core when I think of seeing that film just a few blocks from where a terrorist took the lives of people praying. The evil of intolerance and hatred haunts us still."

Christians, Jews, Muslims, all persons of faith and all who seek peace, must join these eighth-graders in rural Tennessee to remember that intolerance and prejudice leads to death and destruction. We must seek understanding, acceptance and peace.

[interfaith@gvsu.edu](mailto:interfaith@gvsu.edu)