

## ***She Was Excited for a New School. Then the Anti-Semitic 'Jokes' Started.***

First, a deeply offensive photo. Three students' college plans were soon derailed, and a community closed ranks.



By **Sharon Otterman**

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The letters stretch over 30 feet, written into the sand on a beach in New Jersey. The teenager in the photo rests casually on his side above the words, smiling, his head propped up in his hand.

"I h8 Jews," the words read.

The anti-Semitic picture, taken on a junior class trip and texted to a group of classmates at a high school on the Jersey Shore in 2018, was portrayed to the group as an edgy joke.

"Yearbook cover," the boy in the picture texted.

"Oh yea," responded one girl, active in the yearbook club, adding that she had already submitted the photo to the faculty adviser. "Its gonna be great."

Out of town with her parents, a Jewish student named Paige received the message on the group chat. She stared at her phone in shock. There had been other anti-Semitic slights at the high school, the Marine Academy of Science and Technology, a competitive military-themed magnet school in the seaside borough of Highlands, but nothing as blatant as this.

She'd seen classmates doodling swastikas. A group of students had been reading "Mein Kampf," Hitler's autobiography, during free periods. And several students, Paige said, had been calling the SAT teacher an "obnoxious Jew."

Feeling hurt and hated, Paige threw her phone toward her mother. Her father, horrified, sent a screenshot to the principal.

It was a moment that would derail her life, and the lives of the two boys most responsible.

The incident would prompt an investigation by the state attorney general, which in October found probable cause that the school and district had discriminated against Paige based on her religion. It would also inspire a lawsuit against the school, which was filed Wednesday in federal court in Trenton, accusing the district and faculty of discrimination.

It would upend the competitive college hopes not only for the two boys involved, whose admissions offers were rescinded, but also for Paige, who ended up dropping out of the school at the end of her junior year, despite her 4.0 G.P.A.

And it would deeply unsettle this community, which largely sided against Paige and her family in the aftermath, questioning the extent of the problem at the school and anxious about the blow to the school's reputation.

The two boys have described the beach photo as a teenage lapse in judgment and a sarcastic joke that was not meant to target Paige. They say they are not anti-Semitic. For its part, the New Jersey school district has said the incident was handled in accordance with its anti-bullying guidelines. It has denied allegations of a broader atmosphere of anti-Semitism or retaliation.

Still, Paige's story offers a glimpse of what can happen when a bias incident spirals out of control, at a time when there is a surge in these events in educational institutions across the country.

In New Jersey alone, bias incidents reported to law enforcement increased by 55 percent between 2016 and 2018, following a decade of decline. Nearly half of those incidents were committed by minors, police statistics show.

School administrators' response, experts say, is supposed to include discipline, support for the victimized students, investigation and education to stem any patterns of hate that might be bubbling. But in reality, schools often treat bias incidents as one-offs, minimizing or even ignoring them, according to a 2019 report by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

"When we have incidents of bias and hate in our schools, a lot of the time they are met with just a slap on the wrist, and a promise not to do it again," said Gurbir S. Grewal, the New Jersey attorney general. "And I don't think that's appropriate. More often than not, it is symptomatic of something greater happening in that school or that broader community."

### **An outsider from the outset**



MAST, a magnet school, is around 90 percent white and has a strong military affiliation. Dave Sanders for The New York Times

Paige, who is now 18, grew up in Marlboro Township, a well-off enclave in Monmouth County with a large Jewish population about an hour southwest of Manhattan. She was raised to be proud of being Jewish, but her family is not particularly religious and doesn't belong to a synagogue.

Athletic and tall for her age, she played basketball in her Marlboro middle school. She took school seriously and was placed in advanced classes. She liked fashion, and her mother, a professional dressmaker, taught her how to make doll clothes at any early age.

### The Great Read

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- A few years ago, Nicola Coughlan was working in an optician's office in Ireland. Now, with "Bridgerton" and "Derry Girls," she's starring in two of the most beloved shows on Netflix.

"I would describe myself as an old soul, always was," Paige, who asked that her last name be withheld to protect against reprisals, said in an email. In second grade, a teacher told her mother that Paige never seemed to want to be silly.

When a representative from MAST, as the magnet high school is known, visited her middle school, Paige was intrigued. The small vocational school, of about 70 students per grade, specialized in marine sciences and attracted high-performing students from around the county.

The school is a cluster of low-slung buildings on an old military base in Sandy Hook, a strip of protected federal land jutting out from the northern edge of the Jersey Shore.

Paige thought it would feel more like college than high school, and she didn't mind that the Naval Junior ROTC program was required for all students. She didn't focus on the lack of diversity; MAST's population hovers at around 90 percent white, with a handful of Jewish children per grade.

It didn't take long for Paige to realize that MAST was not what she had imagined. On her first day as a freshman, she said, she came home in tears because two teachers had laughed when pronouncing a student's last name, Guiffre, as "Jew-Frey."

"I wouldn't want a last name like that," she recalled one teacher saying. The same teacher would later recommend "Mein Kampf" to her class as a great book, Paige said.

Paige had never felt uncomfortable for being Jewish before. That afternoon after her first day of school, her mother told her she should try sticking it out.

The family had just moved from Marlboro to West Long Branch to be closer to MAST. "This is the real world," her mother recalled telling her. "You are going to see a lot of everything."

Paige's parents, who still live near the school but want to move, now say their deepest regret is keeping Paige at MAST as long as they did.

## 'No one stood by me'

Paige tried to make the best of things in her sophomore year. She was doing well academically, had made friends and was voted class treasurer. When classmates made Jewish jokes, she tried clearing her throat or saying, "Hello, I'm Jewish."

But she still felt like an outsider.

"The anger consumed me and I really didn't know what to do," Paige said. "I knew I didn't belong there."

Late that school year, Paige's mother complained about some of the incidents to the school district, including that one student had identified himself on social media as a member of the Hitler Youth. Nothing seemed to change.

During her junior year, Paige said, two boys sent her an email pretending to be a male Jewish student, suggesting that he and Paige should get married and go to temple together.

Then two months later, on April 21, 2018, the messages from the junior class beach cleanup popped up on her smartphone, from the same two boys. Paige was inconsolable.

"I'm sure you and the school are appalled," her father wrote to the principal, Earl Moore, forwarding him the screen shot.

Mr. Moore, by all accounts, reacted quickly. He immediately headed down to the beach, confronted the students and joined the group text.

An hour later, the boys texted an apology to the group, which now included Mr. Moore. "There are no excuses for our behavior and we are not anti-Semitic," they wrote.

The two boys, both now 18, declined to be interviewed, and The New York Times is not naming them because they were minors at the time of the incident.

By the following Monday, a school investigation found that Paige had been the target of a bullying incident. The two boys who had posed in and posted the picture were suspended for four days, a response within the district's anti-bullying guidelines. The girl who joked about it becoming a yearbook photo was suspended for two days.

"The Monmouth County Vocational School District is committed to providing a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students that is free from harassment, intimidation and bullying, and all forms of bias and discrimination," Timothy McCorkell, the superintendent, said in a letter to The Times.

Within a few weeks, Mr. Moore sent all the juniors on a school trip to a local Holocaust center. The immediate crisis had been dealt with.

But for Paige, things were about to get much worse. During his investigation, Mr. Moore told Paige's classmates that one female student had been so disturbed by the photo that she didn't come to school that Monday, according to the attorney general's report.

Though Mr. Moore said he never referenced Paige, it was not hard to connect the dots to who had told.

By Monday night, Paige began getting texts asking if she was the snitch. Her friends turned against her, she said.

Other classmates stopped talking to her and blocked her on social media, Paige said. She caught a glimpse of an online petition to "snub the snitch." Paige's father wrote to the principal that his daughter hid in classrooms at lunch. "Paige has become the school pariah," he wrote. (Mr. Moore referred all requests for comment to the district, which would not respond to specific allegations while litigation was pending.)

"I just didn't talk to her after that," said a former classmate. Paige, he said, had gotten his friends into serious trouble over what they felt was a stupid joke. "It just didn't seem right."

In mid-June, two months later, Paige found a rock on a water cooler in English class, right behind her seat. "Hope" seemed to be written on it, but turned upside-down, the letters spelled "adolf," an anti-Semitic meme that translates as "Adolf is our last hope." Furious, Paige reported it. The teacher threw the rock outside.

The rock in English class that read "Hope" but also "adolf" when turned upside down.

via US District Court for the District of New Jersey



"Mr. Moore, this has turned into a circus," her father wrote in one of numerous emails asking the principal to stop the apparent retaliation. "She is so humiliated."

Paige was constantly crying and refusing to go to school.

"No one stood by me," Paige said. "No one wanted to lose their friends."

At the end of the school year, Paige's parents filed a complaint with the state attorney general's division of civil rights, saying that she had been subjected to anti-Semitic conduct and then reprisals after reporting it.

In its investigation, the attorney general's office found that while Mr. Moore appropriately addressed the beach incident, he never filed a bullying report about the shunning, nor did he investigate her other anti-Semitism allegations.

"It does not appear the school took any broader actions to discern the extent of anti-Semitic behavior at the school, or to address the reported concerns beyond the beach incident," the report, issued last October, stated.

Instead, Paige says, Mr. Moore recommended she worry less about friends at school and find friends in her synagogue.

## A 'whole underbelly of anti-Semitism'

The anti-Semitic incidents that make headlines are usually the most violent ones. The mass shooting at a kosher market in Jersey City. The stabbing of Orthodox Jews gathered at a Hanukkah party in suburban New York.

But there is a "whole underbelly of anti-Semitism taking place in schools," said Evan R. Bernstein, the vice president of the Anti-Defamation League's northeast division. The organization reported 63 anti-Semitic incidents in New Jersey K-12 schools in 2018, including swastikas being drawn on desks and pennies being thrown at Jewish students.

Without intervention, Mr. Bernstein said, the culture can grow increasingly toxic, with lasting impact on students' lives.

Amy Schneider, 28, a former MAST student, said she was bullied when she was a student there; she recalled swastikas written on her belongings, Hitler salutes and Holocaust jokes.

She never reported it, Ms. Schneider said recently.

"I felt like bullying was an accepted part of being in school," she said. "But you aren't fine for a very long time after that."

School districts nationally are creating task forces and mandating new curriculums to deal with the surge of bias.

A Southern Poverty Law Center survey of some 3,000 teachers nationwide found that about two-thirds of them had witnessed a hate or bias incident at their schools in the fall of 2018. Most incidents, they said, were not addressed by school leaders at all.

Attorney General Grewal of New Jersey said the state's current anti-bullying policies — focused mostly on discipline and reporting — were not enough. He envisioned a schoolwide educational response involving law enforcement when a swastika was found in a school, similar to what happens if a student is caught sexting.

"We need to get in there early and prevent young people from going down these paths, which we see is happening more and more across the state," he said. "Our schools do a great job, but they are falling short here."

Mr. McCorkell said that he felt the district did respond in a more systematic way, along the lines of Mr. Grewal's recommendations. Beginning in the 2018-19 school year, after Paige left, the staff of MAST participated in a year-long anti-bias professional development program that "was so successful that it is now embedded into the MAST curriculum," he said.

## The fallout



Dave Sanders for The New York Times

Paige left MAST and started senior year at a nearby high school, Shore Regional, but she left that school shortly after, she said, when some students found out what had happened and wouldn't talk to her.

Deeply depressed, she ended up home schooling and taking courses at a community college through the end of her senior year.

At MAST, parents and students seemed to rally around the school. After their suspension, the two boys returned to class. They won school awards and were accepted into Cornell and New York University.

Four former classmates and two parents of former classmates said in interviews that they thought Paige and her family had blown the problems at the school out of proportion.

"There were a few people who were a little bit nonprogressive that would say some things that were not O.K.," said one classmate, now 19, who, like all the students, asked not to be identified. "It doesn't make my whole school bad."

A Jewish boy in Paige's class who also received the beach photo told the attorney general's investigators that while "kids say things about being Jewish" at MAST, they were his friends and he didn't feel harassed.

When the attorney general's investigation last October led to news stories, there was broad concern the bad publicity would hurt everyone's college chances.

"To have something like this to be the one thing that people know us for," said one 2018 graduate, who asked that his name be withheld because he is a contracted cadet in the military, "that doesn't really give the full picture."

He had seen the "adolf" rock on the water cooler, he added, but thought of it as a stupid joke.

In their senior year, nearly a year after the beach photo incident, the two boys had their college admissions rescinded. Some felt they were paying too high a price.

"One mistake when you are a teenager should not ruin your entire future," said one of Paige's former friends.

The father of the boy in the picture said in an email: "We are not the victims here, and no one should feel sorry for us. But it is undeniable that the impact of this entire event affected all of the kids and families involved and the community as a whole. I don't think anyone emerged unscathed."

Albert J. Rescino, a lawyer for the boy who sent the photo, said "a tongue-in-cheek sarcastic joke" made when his client was 16 did not justify "attempting to ruin or derail the life of a young man."

Paige and her family bristle at the idea that they should feel bad for the boys. She is now a freshman at a large out-of-state college, which is not what she had hoped for, and is still having trouble trusting people. "I don't think it was a joke at all," she said. "If it was a joke, they would have come up to me and said sorry."

The lawsuit that Paige and her parents filed Wednesday is against the school and district — not the two boys — for not stopping the bullying and anti-Semitism.

"Mr. Moore does not have the excuse that he was too young to know better," their lawyer, Eric Hecker, said.

If administrators had better protected Paige's identity, she said, if they had intervened earlier and supported her, perhaps she could have stayed at the school.

"It is a public school," she said, "and they should have been able to handle it."