

Attorneys Play Key Role In Conn. Chapter Of ADL

MICHELLE GOLLADAY

The Connecticut Law Tribune

July 12, 2003



David Ball

In Hartford last year, more than 40 gravestones were turned over and vandalized in a Jewish cemetery. In late June, a man hung a Nazi flag outside his Stratford home. Last week, fliers were passed around Milford reading, "You can sleep well tonight knowing the [United Klans of America] are awake."

These incidents, among many others, were reported to the Connecticut chapter of the Anti-Defamation League.

The national civil rights agency known as the ADL was founded in 1913 to fight anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry through legislation, advocacy and education. Now in its centennial year, the ADL has 30 regional offices in 21 states and three centers overseas. The Connecticut ADL office is in Hamden.

Attorneys play a large role in the Connecticut organization's leadership. Among them is David A. Ball, who is the managing partner at Cohen and Wolf in Bridgeport. He serves on the regional board and executive committee of the Connecticut chapter.

"It's great that we have the ADL as a resource, to try and solve the problems before they get out of hand," said Ball, who first got involved with the organization in the mid-1990s. "It was a wonderful opportunity to get involved with an organization I thought complimented my skills as a lawyer."

Ball is vice chair of the Connecticut ADL Civil Rights Committee. "We deal with hate crimes—one of my areas of focus," said Ball, who testified before the legislature in 2004, urging Connecticut to expand its hate crime statutes to cover disability and gender identity. "We were able to get the law amended and more people are protected because of that."

In 2010, Gary Jones, who was then a business lawyer at the Farmington firm of Levy & Droney, became director of the Connecticut ADL chapter. "I enjoy being a lawyer, and I volunteer for a lot of things, but the ADL was always my biggest love," said Jones. "We have a lot of great lawyers involved with us at a lot of capacities."

Jones said there are about 60 professionals on the Connecticut ADL regional board, most of them attorneys. While the Connecticut ADL was established in the 1950s with a primary goal of halting anti-Semitism, it has since teamed up with the legal community, law enforcement and volunteer professionals to monitor all types of extremism.

"The ADL has always understood and respected the importance of free speech in our country—even speech that is uncomfortable," said Ball. "The way we deal with hate speech is to shine a light on it, to stand up and say, 'They have the right to speak, and we have the right to respond.'"

In late April, hateful graffiti was discovered in the Sterling Chemistry Lab at Yale University that appeared to threaten arson at the Ivy League's Joseph Slifka Center for Jewish Life on a particular date in May.

Shortly after the graffiti's discovery, the university's police department and the FBI contacted the ADL for guidance in helping analyze the threat and the potential relevance of the date mentioned. The date happened to coincide with Shavuot, the Jewish "Festival of Weeks," which commemorates God giving Moses the Torah on Mount Sinai.

"Law enforcement, individual members of the community, whoever it may be—they reach out to us and ask if we know anything," said Jones. "We monitor extremists. We read their work. We follow them....In many cases, law enforcement reaches out to us and asks if we know anything if there's an incident—sometimes we help law enforcement stop things."

The Connecticut ADL works on several other levels. It lobbies lawmakers to support certain legislation. In the fall of 2011, Jones was present when Governor Dannel Malloy signed "An Act Concerning the Strengthening of School Bullying Laws" into law. The ADL has developed an anti-bullying curriculum — which includes cyberbullying — and the organization also is involved in training school personnel how to recognize bullying and to properly address it.

On a national level, the ADL claims to be the "biggest non-governmental law enforcement trainer in the nation," according to Jones. While the national organization works with FBI

officers, the Connecticut chapter works with state police to help educate officers about hate crimes — especially how to identify them and how to help victims.

As for handling complaints, the ADL forwards the most serious cases to law enforcement personnel. But in other instances, it attempts to set things right on its own.

In March 2012, a Stratford woman was upset after her landlord demanded she remove an important religious symbol, a mezuzah, from the doorway of her rental unit. She contacted the ADL. "We tried our best to handle things quietly," said Jones. "We sent several letters explaining the importance of the mezuzah, and we kept getting refused."

The condo association threatened to fine the woman for each day the mezuzah remained on her doorway. Jones did not believe the condo association was anti-Semitic, but was rather uneducated about the culture. However, state Senate Majority Leader Martin Looney felt there was no excuse.

At a press conference at the Hamden ADL office, Looney proposed legislation, co-drafted by members of the ADL, aimed at protecting the rights of Connecticut residents to hang religious objects on door frames. The legislature approved the measure in 2012.

Unlike the American Civil Liberties Union, the ADL doesn't represent individuals in court. But the organization does get involved in cases at the appellate and Supreme Court level, often by filing amicus briefs. "We talk about the principles involved in a certain case, we talk about what we want the brief to cover—and we rely on the best law firms," Jones said.

New Haven-based Wiggin and Dana has a longstanding pro bono relationship with the ADL on a regional and national level.

The ADL honored the firm in May with its 2013 Torch of Liberty Award, presented annually to citizens and corporations whose efforts have helped to strengthen the Greater New Haven community.

Wiggin and Dana partner Alan G. Schwartz, a longtime ADL board member, played a role in writing the amicus briefs in two cases that went to the U.S. Supreme Court. Both focused on issues involving the separation of church and state.

"I was a young lawyer [in the late 1980s] looking for an organization to get involved with. I met the director at the time [David Waren], who was new to the office," said Schwartz. "I became quite enamored with the organization—not simply the civil rights part but the legislative part, and the programs it offers. The ADL really has a laundry list of enmities that appeal to me.

"The organization from top to bottom, locally and nationally, is run by top shelf people...many of whom could be making a lot more money in the private sector given their talents and skills," he continued. "Having chosen the private sector myself, I thought there's nothing better I could do than lend a hand and get my firm behind it."•