

Abby Mudd:

Standing Up to Antisemitism

BY BETH PANITZ



BARBARA MUDD

In a school tainted with antisemitism and racism, Abby stood up for her beliefs.

Abby Mudd walked nervously to the front of the class, her heart beating so fast and loud that it felt as if the other students could hear it pounding in her chest. The Massachusetts tenth-grader feared speaking out, but after seven months of enduring antisemitic slurs, she knew she couldn't stay silent. Abby took a deep breath. "I never understood how difficult it could be to be a minority until I came to school here," Abby said, addressing a group of 11th and 12th graders.

Abby expected changes when she left her Jewish day school after ninth grade and transferred to a public school in September 2004. But she wasn't prepared for the ugly reception she received at her new school in Worcester County. Only a handful of Jews and other minorities attended the school, and some of the mostly white, Christian student body was set on making anyone different from them feel bad. From day one,

Abby witnessed racism and antisemitism. Swastikas were etched on desks and in textbooks; students made racist remarks openly in class; and some of her classmates even participated in a neo-Nazi group.

"What they were doing was so humanly wrong that it made me sick to my stomach," says Abby. Rather than leave the school, Abby courageously returned each day, even challenging classmates when they made racist insults. Intent on stopping the blatant hate crimes, she reported the incidents to her principal. The administration, however, closed its eyes to the widespread antisemitism and racism; so Abby decided to speak out. She contacted the local police, and called every civil rights group she could think of, including the Anti-Defamation League and the National

Association for the Advancement of Colored People. She and her mother also registered complaints with the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office and Department of Education.

Talking to other students, though, took the greatest courage. By speaking out and identifying herself as a Jew, she feared she might become a target for harassment. But deep in her gut, Abby knew she must raise her voice. "I was the only one who even considered speaking up," she says. "It would have been a tragedy if I decided to stay silent." Putting aside her fears, Abby spoke to a class of peer counselors about her experiences, hoping to raise awareness among a group of students who could make a difference.

"I needed to say something, not just for me, but for everyone in the school," says Abby. Her efforts were rewarded when the Massachusetts Department of Education required the school to implement changes to comply with the district's civil rights policy. This included training staff to handle incidents of discrimination, and designating someone to handle complaints. In addition, because of Abby's experience, the school was accepted into the Massachusetts Attorney General's new Safe School Initiative, which helps schools prevent harassment and hate crimes.

After confronting hatred for the entire year, Abby decided to finish her high school degree at a community college, where she's also earning college credits. She knows that the personal courage she discovered at her high school will help her through college and beyond. "Looking back, it was a long, long year," recalls Abby, "but the challenges I faced made me stronger in the end." 🌟

Meet Abby



AGE: 17

FAVORITE BOOK: *Harry Potter* series

FAVORITE JEWISH HERO: Baseball player Sandy Koufax, who sat out a World Series game on Yom Kippur in 1965, "because he wasn't afraid to let people know he was Jewish"

FAVORITE SCHOOL SUBJECTS: English and history

HOBBIES: Cooking, watching Mets and Red Sox baseball games

CAREER GOAL: Law

FAVORITE JEWISH HOLIDAY: Pesach, "because it reminds me how proud I am to be Jewish"

FAVORITE QUOTE: "Small minds talk about people; average minds talk about events; and great minds talk about ideas."

