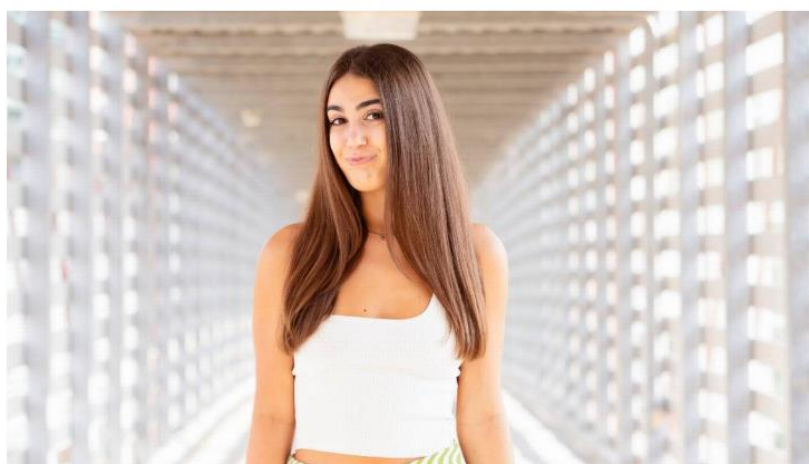


CRIME

This Blue Valley student says swastikas and hate speech are nothing new at her school

BY SARAH RITTER

UPDATED JANUARY 20, 2023 12:07 PM



Blue Valley High School senior Emma Sandler, a Jewish student advocate, said she was “heartbroken and frustrated” after her school was vandalized with swastikas, racial slurs and other offensive language.

Contributed

The swastikas and racial slurs scrawled outside Blue Valley High School on Monday — Martin Luther King Jr. Day — were indeed shocking. But Emma Sandler, a Jewish student advocate at the school, says that was hardly the first hatred she’s seen there.

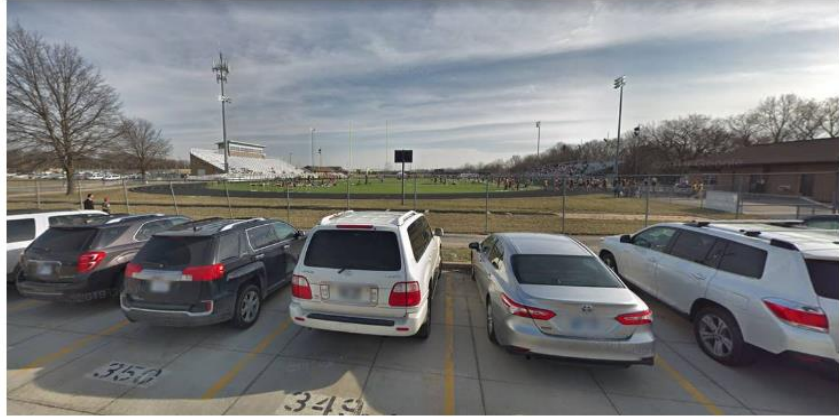
She has watched a group of students draw swastikas on their desks in math class. Students have drawn numbers on their arms to mock Holocaust victims.

She sometimes felt “so isolated and alone at my high school,” Sandler, a 17-year-old senior, told The Star on Thursday.

A few weeks ago, Sandler returned to her Overland Park home after studying abroad in Israel for the fall semester.

“Because I was in Israel for four months, I kind of got a break from all of the antisemitism in America. Coming back home, I was prepared I was going to experience it in some form. But this happening, especially at my school, I was more in shock,” she said.

On Monday, the [Blue Valley High football stadium and press box were defaced](#) and damaged, Principal Charles Golden said in a letter to the community. Videos and photos of the vandalism showed the N-word and other racist and homophobic slurs, a swastika, the words “F--- Jews” and other offensive language spray-painted inside the press box.



Vandals defaced the football stadium and press box at Blue Valley High School in Overland Park on Martin Luther King Jr. Day with graphic images and vulgar, racially offensive language, school officials said. This Google Maps Street View image of the stadium is from 2019. *Google Maps*

The stadium, next to the high school at 6001 W. 159th St. in Overland Park, was closed Tuesday to allow the district to evaluate the damage and paint over the vandalism, officials said.

“Hate like this has no place at Blue Valley High and is not representative of our Tiger community,” Golden wrote.

“Knowing that I have to attend my high school after this hateful action is extremely upsetting to me as an openly Jewish student,” said Sandler, who does advocacy work with [SevenDays](#), an organization that works to overcome hate by teaching kindness. It was formed after three people were [killed by a white supremacist](#) in 2014 outside Jewish sites in Overland Park.

“I am both heartbroken and furious, but we will move forward with kindness, not hate,” Sandler said. “I hope that the appropriate steps are taken to ensure that Jewish and other minority students feel safe attending school.”

As of Thursday, no arrests had been announced. The vandalism remains under investigation, said Officer John Lacy, a spokesman for the Overland Park police department.

Students and community advocates are demanding action, hoping to see those responsible charged and disciplined, and hoping the district will find ways to better educate and support students.

“This is a hate crime. It’s illegal. I’m hoping the authorities are taking proper actions and really handling the situation diligently,” Sandler said.

In a letter, leaders of Kansas City's LGBTQ Commission said they "hope that those who are responsible are held accountable so that healing may start to occur in the Blue Valley High School community."

Some said the incident brought back traumatic memories of the 2014 shootings, when a man with a history of antisemitism opened fire and killed two people outside the Jewish Community Center and then a third at a nearby Jewish assisted living facility. One of the victims was [14-year-old Reat Underwood](#), a Blue Valley High School student. It turned out that none of the victims was Jewish.

In condemning the vandalism this week, Overland Park's [Jewish Community Relations Bureau](#)/American Jewish Committee emphasized the "local act of hate is not an isolated incident." The group said 81% of students surveyed in the region last year reported experiencing or witnessing at least one form of antisemitism at school.

"We strongly denounce this serious act of hate, which included swastikas alongside other hateful racist and homophobic messages," Executive Director Gavriela Geller said in an email. "The actions are even more abhorrent given the timing of the incident on Martin Luther King Day, a day where we remember the legacy of Dr. King and are encouraged to improve our communities."

The group said it trained Blue Valley administrators and principals in August 2021 on how to better understand and support Jewish students. Leaders said they are prepared to continue working with the district.

"I definitely think (staff training) is a great start. Maybe that should be a yearly occurrence," Sandler said. "And I think we need to continue increasing education."

Sandler said she doesn't want to see the latest act of hate swept under the rug.

"I do think it's important to note that there have been more hate crimes. Talking about it is good. But what are we going to do next? The conversation can't end here," she said.

A Blue Valley spokeswoman said that district staff worked to offer more support to students this week.

The vandalism follows several other racist acts at schools throughout the Kansas City metro. [Pembroke Hill School](#), a Kansas City prep school, in the past few years has investigated swastikas and "KKK" being written on desks. In Olathe, a photo of a white student asking a date to [homecoming using a racist sign](#) sparked outrage. Officials in the Park Hill school district disciplined students for starting a [racist petition](#) calling for a return of slavery.

Includes reporting by The Star's Robert A. Cronkleton.

This story was originally published January 20, 2023 6:00 AM.

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