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GTA

Someone put a drawing of a noose in her daughter's backpack. Then things got worse

By **Shree Paradkar** Race & Gender ColumnistMon., Nov. 8, 2021 |  11 min. read

Warning: Graphic content outlining anti-Black racist and antisemitic abuse.

Natasha Shakespeare now calls herself naïve to have thought things would have changed in the past 30 years.

In the '90s, back when hers was one of a handful of Black families in Simcoe County, she had been sexually assaulted at school. When her mother came to pick her up, the principal told her mother the perpetrator was having a rough time and his family was going through a lot, but that, “your daughter will be just fine.”

Now, as her 13-year-old daughter wrestles with anti-Blackness, Shakespeare has found that systemic response still remains focused on defending or building the innocence of the culprit.

After her daughter's experiences at a previous school, Shakespeare founded an [advocacy group](#) called Parents Against Racism — Simcoe County in February. In March she filed a lawsuit against the Simcoe County District School Board in the Ontario Court of Justice alleging it failed to adequately address regular instances of racism and bullying. The case is ongoing.

This past summer her family moved to a different neighbourhood and in September her daughter started at a new school — Forest Hill Public School, a kindergarten-to-Grade 8 school of about 600 students in Midhurst, a village on the outskirts of Barrie.

It felt like it was a moment of hope.

Instead, every morning Shakespeare and her husband weigh whether or not to send their daughter to school. Then they fret over the implications of that decision.

Their daughter — whom the Star will not name to protect her privacy — has been sucker-punched by anti-Black violence right from the first day of school. Shakespeare said it began with an image of a noose and slurs, escalated to death and rape threats and finally, a physical attack.

Her experiences represent an explosion of anti-Blackness in schools across Ontario, often intersecting with other forms of hate, including antisemitism. It has left Black parents knocking on doors of advocacy groups, media and legal experts in their search for safety in schools.

The Simcoe school board cited the privacy of those involved and said it would not comment on the situation, but that “any incident of this nature is treated very seriously with immediate action and consequences.” The board is “conducting a thorough investigation with the support of an outside agency,” John Dance, director of education, told the Star in a statement.

He listed strategies the board is undertaking to combat racism including mandatory anti-racism training for all staff and hiring a human rights and equity adviser.

“This is not an isolated case,” said lawyer Darryl Singer of Diamond & Diamond, who is representing Shakespeare and her family. “I have dozens of these cases (from different boards) at any time.”

Charline Grant, a co-founder of the advocacy group [Parents of Black Children](#), said the group has been inundated with calls about anti-Black racism since the beginning of the school year. “We’re averaging two or three calls every day,” she said.

Where previously the group would get calls about the gifted or special needs programs or about streaming, now Grant said they’re all about racial violence. “More of our children are in school, more this year. And every time we (the group) are in the media, we see a rise in our calls in our intake.”

In the last few days alone, a Toronto teacher at Parkdale Collegiate Institute [showed up in Blackface](#) for Halloween while another is being investigated for using a racial slur. And in Scarborough, a Black parent told a rally to protest inadequate support by William G. Davis Junior Public School that his nine-year-old son was the victim of racist bullying and escalating hate there. Other parents spoke about their experiences at that school and elsewhere.

For Shakespeare, going to court was the last resort to hold the school board accountable. “I’m hitting barriers everywhere I go,” she said. “I write letters. I write emails. I get people to support me. At this point we’re at litigation and it’s like I’m still hitting a wall. Like what else has to happen so this doesn’t continue to happen?”

When Shakespeare’s daughter came home from school that first day, she told her mother she had found a hand-drawn picture of a noose in her backpack. “Mom, I don’t want you to say anything because I just want to make friends,” she said.

“I started to cry,” Shakespeare said. “I was angry. I was mad. I was scared.”

But she didn’t report it. In any case, her daughter had grabbed the picture and thrown it in the garbage. With it went any chance of being believed.

Over the next few days, Shakespeare’s daughter told her mom some students commented about her race, making fun of a Black Lives Matter sign she wrote on the board or saying All Lives Matter. By Friday, Shakespeare, who was wrestling with her decision to say nothing, called the principal. “I’m trying to be a parent that’s not a problem parent, which sounds crazy to me because now I’m a problem parent for speaking out, right?” she said.

She said she told the principal what was happening but that she didn’t want her to do anything.

Week two, her child came home to say she got called into the office. Another student had used the N-word in a group text, was asked to do some reading on it, write a letter on his reflections and apologize to her daughter who had been present in that chat.

Shakespeare had a meeting with the principal and vice-principal and she said they spent the whole meeting talking about the other student, how he really didn’t know better and this was an opportunity to teach him about the N-word. To Shakespeare, that focus on sympathizing with the perpetrator felt like 1992 all over again.

“Where’s the compassion and concern for my child, the victim?” Shakespeare asked.

Lawyer Singer said all his cases on this issue follow a certain trajectory. “The board is aware of what’s going on, the administrators are, whether it’s the principal, teacher or vice-principal. It’s been brought to their attention by the child. It’s been brought to their attention by the parents, and they simply turn a blind eye to it.”

At William G. Davis school in Scarborough, for instance, parent John E. John said a boy once pulled his nine-year-old son’s mask and ran. His son chased the boy, got his mask back and in the process, the other boy’s mask fell off. A note from the teacher to both sets of parents held both children responsible. But when his son gets hit, even with a stick, he doesn’t get an email, John said.

John said his son is facing escalating hate: if he’s standing in a line with others to get into school, the bullies tap the others on the shoulder and tell them to not speak to him. One of them recently told him, “I wish you weren’t born.” One said: “You’re lucky you’re

not a Jew.” One picked up a large stone and asked him, “Do you see this stone?” and his son said yes. “This is your head,” said the boy and smashed it on a rock.

“These kinds of comments and threats are completely unacceptable and will not be tolerated,” Toronto District School Board spokesperson Ryan Bird told the Star. “We have been working with the families involved to address what happened and ensure that all students and their families feel welcomed and supported at the school.”

But John said nobody from the school came to address the people rallying or even to ask after his son, who has been absent from school.

Frequently, Singer said, “a Black child that is being bullied at some point just says ‘enough is enough; nobody’s helping me’ and they lash out physically at the bully. And all of the sudden ... the school board is all over it with their zero-tolerance policy. ‘You hit that kid. You’re suspended. You hit that kid. We’re calling the police’ And this is after, in some cases, a year ... or two years of this bullying.”

Of course, the parents wonder, where was the zero-tolerance policy on bullying?

After John organized the rally on Oct. 31, the school principal sent a note to parents saying they have reached out to the parent to discuss the issue. The school also offered counselling and support for students who witnessed the rally and had concerns about what was going on.

Another Black parent Kashoro Nyenyez said when they moved into the east Scarborough community in August from the United States, they were given the runaround when they tried to place their children in their home school, which was Davis. TDSB’s online portal identifies their street as being in the catchment area for Davis, but they said office staff expressly told them it wasn’t. They eventually managed to place their children there with the help of a concerned principal from a nearby school.

“Try to be in my shoes,” their father Jean-Claude Luhere said. “As a parent. I’m new in the area. We didn’t know anybody. That really hurt me.”

“This is not the experience we want any family to have when attempting to register at a new school and we regret any confusion and any undue stress on the family,” the TDSB’s Bird said. “Since that time, we are ensuring that this situation is not repeated.”

On the Friday of her daughter’s third week of class, Shakespeare got a call from the school. A white mother whose mobile device is linked to her child’s came across a group conversation on their school account, was alarmed by its content and alerted the school.

Shakespeare’s daughter was referenced in the chat, the content of which was so vile, so violent, so graphic and so full of hatred that the school called the Ontario Provincial Police. Eventually three boys – including the child who apologized for saying the N-word – were suspended for two-and-a-half weeks, Shakespeare said.

By Monday, the school was abuzz with what was said in the chat. “They said they won’t have sex with you because you’re Black,” her daughter’s friends told her. “They said they’d rather have sex with a deformed Jew.”

Grant, the parent advocate, said these boys didn’t “just become these racist thugs in Grade 8. These are Proud Boys in the making.”

Shakespeare said police did not interview her daughter.

“Police attended for a report to be filed, however no police action was taken as it was decided by the principal to be handled within the school,” Huronia West OPP spokesperson Liz Newton told the Star. “As such, no charges were laid by police. The investigation remains within the school and the board.”

During the fourth week, Shakespeare’s daughter found a note in her desk. The note said, “Shut up” and “I’ll rape you in the bathroom.”

This time she kept the note and brought it home. She told Shakespeare there have been other notes but that she kept getting rid of them.

The school investigated but could not determine who wrote the note.

In mid-October, Shakespeare's daughter called home asking her mom to pick her up and texted a picture of a note she received. It said, "Go kill yourself, dickhead n-."

Shakespeare immediately left for school, forwarded the text to a board superintendent and asked how her daughter was going to be protected..

Later that day, he called to give her a heads up that the three boys who had been suspended would be returning to school the next day. She asked: how will the school keep her daughter safe since they are in the same class? No answer.

Why are they welcome, Shakespeare asked. "We talk about having safe schools. We talk about trauma-informed schools. How is my kid supposed to function when she has to look at these people all day, every day? And would you feel safe? Would you be able to concentrate? Would you be able to stay organized, stay on task?"

"At this point in my mind it's like, what else needs to happen for them to not be there?"

But it was not over yet.

The next day Shakespeare and her husband didn't want to send their daughter to school. But she wanted to go. There was a football game and she was on the team. "It's actually a positive thing in her life."

So they sent her for half a day. But soon Shakespeare received a text saying, "Hey mom you need to come pick me up." Her daughter was distraught and in tears.

She said one of the boys who came back from suspension targeted her at recess by throwing a soccer ball and a football at her. He called her a f- (a homophobic slur) and told her to go back to "her own country."

This is what Shakespeare had feared. "It's getting worse and worse and worse."

She said her daughter's teacher came over after and said, "Hey, are you OK?" and went on with his day.

"How would you not be taking that seriously, given everything that's happened?" Shakespeare asked.

This is the same teacher who Shakespeare said would not accommodate her request that her daughter be allowed to text her if she needed to cope. Instead, he sent her the Student Code of Conduct. He said her daughter could go to the principal's office if she wanted to text her mother and do it under the principal's eye.

"No accommodation. No compassion," Shakespeare said. "I want my child to go to school and just have normal teenager problems."

The advocacy group she founded has five executive members who host monthly meetings and workshops with parents of racialized children to connect them with resources and help advocate for their children. In total, about 200 parents attend the meetings.

"There is no support so we're starting to set one up ourselves," Shakespeare said.

The board has not yet filed a statement of defence in her lawsuit, Singer said.

Meanwhile, the lack of accountability from the system has pushed her daughter out of school. The bullies are receiving an education. Her daughter is not. Even away from school, she received a few texts from students accusing her of lying.

The girl has become withdrawn, Shakespeare said. "You can imagine what it's like with those things you're experiencing over and over again."

She said her daughter ordinarily loves school, loves learning. "She wakes up every day and she's at home. She's not at school. She's not learning. That's not normal. Teenagers go to school and get into silly trouble. Like what clothes they should wear. Their hair.

"And I don't have answers for her."



Shree Paradkar is a Toronto-based columnist covering issues around race and gender for the Star. Follow her on Twitter: [@ShreeParadkar](https://twitter.com/ShreeParadkar)

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