

Oct 16, 2015

Auschwitz storm prompts NDP's Johnstone to visit death camp: Dreschel

Hamilton Spectator
By [Andrew Dreschel](#)



After facing a firestorm of criticism for saying she didn't know what Auschwitz was, NDP candidate Alex Johnstone quietly visited the notorious Nazi death camp this week.

In a Friday [Facebook](#) posting, Johnstone said she accepted an invitation from The Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies to join their annual mission to Auschwitz and other sites in Poland and Austria. "I felt it was important for me to accept their invitation — and so I joined the trip from October 11-14."

"I am committed to raising awareness about the need to combat racism, discrimination and anti-Semitism in all its forms. I hope that this step will help me in that goal," Johnstone said on Facebook.

Paul Mason, Johnstone's campaign manager, said in an interview Johnstone felt the trip was an important part of her community outreach.

"From the moment Simon Wiesenthal extended the invitation, we took that invitation seriously and we were able to actually do that and have that visit," Mason said.

"I think it was important for Alex and for her campaign to do. I think it was important for Alex personally; it was important for her campaign that she does this."

Johnstone made international headlines late last month when she said during an interview she didn't know what [Auschwitz](#) was until a controversy erupted over a 2008 post in a friend's Facebook page.

In the post, Johnstone described the electrified fence posts around the death camp that was operated in occupied Poland as having a phallic look.

She apologized immediately, but later that day stepped into hotter water when during an interview with The Hamilton Spectator she said: "Well, I didn't know what Auschwitz was, or I didn't up until today."

Her statements shocked and appalled many, leading Johnstone pledging to work with Jewish organizations to raise awareness about racism and anti-Semitism.

Johnstone, a Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board trustee, is running in the new riding of [Hamilton West-Ancaster-Dundas](#). Shortly after the controversy broke, she stepped aside as vice-chair of the school board. She is the trustee for Wards 11/12, which encompasses Ancaster, Glanbrook and part of Stoney Creek.

The designated spokesperson for the Toronto-based Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center is still in Europe on the Compassion to Action mission and could not be reached.

A spokesperson for B'nai Brith Canada says he's glad Johnston visited the Auschwitz memorial and museum where an estimated 1.1 million people, the overwhelming majority Jews, were killed from 1940-1945.

"We are pleased to see that she has taken the initiative and we will be working closely with Alex to answer any questions she may have in order to meet our shared goal of combating racism, anti-Semitism and discrimination in Canada," CEO Michael Mostyn said via email.

Johnstone did not immediately respond to an interview request. But her Facebook statement said listening to community response to her "inappropriate comments" has been an "extremely educational and humbling experience."

Asked if Johnstone is getting blowback on her comments at the campaign door, Mason played the impact down.

"We weren't getting a great deal. For everybody who talked about it, there were another five people saying they want lawn signs and they're voting for us."

Johnstone is up against Liberal Filomena Tassi, Conservative Vincent Samuel and Peter Ormond of the Green Party.

It's not clear if she intended to publicize her Auschwitz trip during the final days of the election. Her Facebook statement only went up about half an hour after The Spectator called Mason to check the validity of growing rumours about the trip.

What is clear, however, is that the dates for the annual Simon Wiesenthal mission were preplanned and included in the organization's invitation to Johnston. The visit to the death camp itself was scheduled for Tues. Oct. 13. The mission included Ontario school board, political and police representatives.

Andrew Dreschel's commentary usually appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday. adreschel@thespec.com 905-526-3495 @AndrewDreschel