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Teachers, Warren Beer students get eye-opening lessons at Holocaust center

By Gina Joseph



A poster on the wall at the Holocaust Memorial Center of three children goes a long way to illustrate the compassion that we should have for each other, regardless of ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds.

One of the lessons from the [Holocaust Memorial Center's Echoes and Reflections Curriculum](#) that teachers are sharing with their students is that history is made through a series of choices and that every choice has a consequence.

"This exhibit talks about the choices we made that affected Japanese Americans during World War II," said Ruth Bergman, director of education for the Holocaust Memorial Center (HMC), during a tour of "The Tragedy of War: Japanese American Internment," one of three special exhibits on display at the Zekelman Family Campus through April 1.

During World War II, 120,000 ethnic Japanese on the west coast were forced to live in camps overseen by armed guards. Many of the people were Americans, but because of their ethnicity and background they were considered dangerous.

"That's exactly the point of why we do what we do," Bergman said. "If these kids can start to recognize the beginning stages of hate they can work to combat it."

Michigan law requires schools ensure that their social studies curriculum for grades 8 to 12 include age- and grade-appropriate lessons about genocide, including the Holocaust, totaling six hours of instruction a year.

To help schools meet the requirement and through the generous support of the Ravitz Foundation, HMC created its Echoes and Reflections Curriculum in 2018.

Since then, more than 450 teachers from 242 schools around the state including the Upper Peninsula have participated in the robust program that not only educates teachers about the Holocaust, but also best pedagogic practices and the lessons to be learned.

"We take our mission very seriously and remain committed to learning lessons from the Holocaust and applying what we have learned to other genocides. In a world still filled with hate and bigotry, this is more important than ever," said Rabbi Eli Mayerfield, CEO of the HMC.

Ryan Van Thournout concurs.

"It's something that people don't think about for the most part because it happened in the past. But it can happen again, and it is happening," said Van Thournout, a teacher at Beer Middle School in Warren, speaking over the latest news on a big screen TV, showing a confrontation between Catholic high school students and a Native American veteran attending an anti-abortion rally in Washington, D.C.

After attending the program at HMC, Van Thournout helped to organize a field trip for students at his school. "We took as many eighth-graders as we could," Van Thournout said.

Thanks to funding provided by grants, HMC was able to provide bus transportation for all of the Beer Middle School students. "We ended up taking about 240 students in two trips," said Van Thournout, adding while the students did not say much during the tour, the trip led to a great discussion at school about how bad things can happen when there's a lot of hate going on.

"Teaching about the Holocaust is so important for our school. The only diversity we have is when someone moves in, whose family hasn't lived here for generations," said a teacher from Bay City, who attended the teaching program last May. "Everyone is 'Wonder Bread white' and our students are not exposed to anyone who is different than they are. Echoes and Reflections, provides the tools I need to help foster a sense of empathy with people my students have never met."

"I think one of the things I really liked about the program is that they use the lessons from the past to create life lessons for the kids today," said Kristen Avey, who teaches global history and current world issues at Dakota High school. "They talk a lot about not being a bystander and how even the smallest act can make a difference," Avey said, citing the example she was shown of a

German man, who offered to help a Jewish shop owner, clean up the broken glass in front of his store. This historical example of one man's choice to do the right thing was shown through a video. Another example of history used to connect and engage students is artwork or interviews with survivors.

"I feel like the interviews are moving but not disturbing," Avey said. "They've done a really good job of giving the students something interesting and meaningful that they can connect to without the shock and awe-aspect of it all."

FYI

The three special exhibits debuting at the Holocaust Memorial Center include:

- **The Tragedy of War: Japanese American Internment:** The exhibit revisits the injustice of what happened to Japanese-Americans during World War II, through stories and photographs. The exhibit was curated by the Kennesaw State University Museum of History and Holocaust Education in Georgia.
- **Jehovah's Witnesses: Faith Under Fire:** This exhibit highlights the Christian community of 35,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany who refused to conform to the Nazi ideology of hate. Thrown into Nazi camps for their defiance, they became eyewitnesses of Nazi genocide and an example of ordinary people who followed their conscience in the face of tyranny. The exhibit was created by the Arnold-Liebster Foundation in Germany.
- **Rwanda: Personal Images-Artwork by Vivian Bower:** This exhibit features a series of pastel drawings by Bower, about the genocide that took place in Rwanda during 1994 and 1995.

The Holocaust Memorial Center Zekelman Family Campus is at 28123 Orchard Lake Road, Farmington Hills. Hours: Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. (last admission at 4 p.m.), Monday (9:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. (last admission at 7:30 p.m.) and Friday 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. (last admission at 2 p.m.). Groups of 10 people or more can book a tour. For tours call 248-553-2400, extension 144.

For more information visit holocaustcenter.org